COLONIALISM AND SOCIAL HISTORY OF A VERNACULAR: ASSAMESE LANGUAGE AND FOLKLORE IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO GAUHATI UNIVERSITY FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY IN FOLKLORE IN THE FACULTY OF ARTS





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This is to certify that this thesis entitled **Colonialism and Social History of a Vernacular: Assamese Language and Folklore in the Nineteenth Century** has been prepared by **Banani Chakravarty** under my supervision. She has fulfilled all the requirements under the Ph.D regulation of Gauhati University. No part of this thesis has been published earlier. This thesis has never been presented earlier for any degree or any such purpose to any University or Institution. This is an entirely fresh and original piece of research work.

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DECLARATION OF THE CANDIDATE

I hereby declare that the thesis entitled *Colonialism and Social History of a Vernacular: Assamese Language and Folklore in the Nineteenth Century* or any part of it has not been submitted for any other research degree to this university or any other university or institution.

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Chapter I

Introduction: Linguistic History and Philology

1.1 Colonialism and language

From eighteenth century onwards, European states made their power visible through the gradual extension of officializing procedures that established and extended their hold in many areas. They took control by differentiating between private and public sphere; by recording transactions like sale of property; by counting and classifying their populations; by replacing religious institutions as the registrar of births, marriages and deaths; and by standardizing language and scripts (Cohn: 1995: 3). This process of state building in Great Britain was closely linked with its emergence as an imperial power. As India was the largest and the most important colony of the empire, some of these projects of modern state building were first worked out in the Indian sub-continent and then applied in England and vice versa. The study of comparative philology originated in India by the study of Indian languages. On the other hand, the model of modern education system in England, where resources for governing classes were produced, was applied

to India and other colonies. As the British entered India, they tried to decipher and comprehend the colony by their own form of knowledge. They wanted to codify Indian ideas and knowledge that could later be useful for governance of the colony. The first step the colonizers undertook for collecting local knowledge was to learn the local languages. Classical language like Sanskrit, Persian, Arabic as well as vernacular languages were understood to be the perquisite form of knowledge for all others and the first educational institutions that the British established in India were to teach their own officials Indian languages. This knowledge of local languages helped the officials to communicate, control and rule the native speakers. Language was one of the important apparatus that was used by the colonial rulers in India to strengthen their imperialistic and cultural hold. Through the construction of literary history of ancient and medieval India and reconstructing modern Indian Vernaculars on European models, the colonial rulers tried to achieve their goal. Major cultural and political shifts occurred through colonial interventions that recorded linguistic functions, textual hierarchies and the context and distribution of literate skill in the country (Naregal: 2001: 2).

Colonialism accomplished these vast changes through the discipline of philology and the pragmatic agency of education policy. Given that language is foundational to all forms of cultural practices, focusing on language while mapping major shifts seems very important. The diversity of ways through which the liberal imagination underwent vernacularization in the Indian sub-continent as well as other South Asian countries needs to be mapped in order to understand the diverse trajectory of non-western modernity. Colonial rule brought about structures of authority based on cultural premises very different from those that has long prevailed. Establishing a common ideological space between the new rulers and their subjects assumed the utmost significance in colonial policy. And colonial ideology brought language, communication and authority to the forefront in an unprecedented way.

1.2 Colonial discovery of Indian languages

The belated British discovery of Indian languages was an exercise in power. For over a century and a half, British traders and soldiers were content to rely on interpreters and some knowledge of Portuguese. They began systematic study of Persian, Sanskrit and Bengali once they had direct political authority. But starting with

William Jones, the British developed from their study not only a practical advantage but an ideology of language as separate and autonomous objects in the world which could be classified, arranged and deplored as media of exchange. Different language had different histories; the histories of the people who spoke or used them to make sense of the advantage that native speakers had gained over others in the course of history. Just as it was beginning to wane as an exporter of textiles, India became a rich field for philological enterprise.

Persian was the first Indian language to get attention by the British as its knowledge became essential immediately after the battle of Plassey for recruitment and training an Indian army, and to develop a system of alliances and treaties with native princes to protect the company's territory. As the native translators were liable to leak company's secrets, it was considered better to learn the language and then use it. The prestige of the Persian language as the best language for a junior officer continued into the early nineteenth century. The study of Sanskrit which was regarded as the 'mysterious' language by the seventeenth and eighteenth century British, had started much later. The motivation for the British in India to learn Sanskrit in the late eighteenth century had two basis (Cohn:

1995: 26). The first basis was the eagerness to decipher the 'mystery' of the secret language. The second, practical and immediate necessity was Warren Hastings' plan to govern India according to Indian principle, particularly in relation to law. In order to establish what the Hindu law was, Hastings persuaded eleven *pundits* from Bengal to make a compilation of the relevant Sanskrit *shastric* literature. He also appointed N.B. Halhed to supervise the compilation and then translate the resulting text into English. As Halhed had very little knowledge of Sanskrit, he depended heavily on a Persian translation by a *munshi*, who relied on the pundits' Bengali or Hindustani explanation of the original text. The authenticity of the text came into question because of the process of the translation. William Jones, who had been appointed judge in the Supreme Court of Judicature in 1783, therefore, himself learnt Sanskrit and was getting ready to translate a law text from Sanskrit (Cohn: 1995: 29). Jones had the larger project of freeing British judges from dependence on the venality and corruption of the Indian interpreters of Hindu and Muslim law.

1.3 Genealogy of Indian languages

From eighteenth century onwards, the question central to the problematic of linguistic study was about the genealogy or the study of the origin and family of language. It was also the foundation of the Asiatic Society in Calcutta, where a more scientific alternative to Bryant's speculative etymological method of language study was being formed. Examination of language structure together with external evidences such as archaeological evidence would form the basis of Bryant's historiographical method. His theory intended to place Biblical historical narrative on a pragmatic and sound footing. Later William Jones also tried to establish a relationship between different nations like Arab, Chinese, Indian or European with reference to their common origin with the sons of Noah. Moreover, with the study of similarities between Greek, Latin, and Sanskrit, he paved the way to the birth of the field of historical comparative philology. Meanwhile, apart from this type of historical study of language, contemporary European discussions of linguistic difference were already invested with a sense of national hierarchy.

By the middle of the nineteenth century, colonial authorities had formulated a very different analysis of the Indian languages. H.H.Wilson, the Boden professor of Sanskrit at Oxford and the author of *'A Glossary of the Judicial and Revenue Terms of British India'* (1855), classified Indian languages into two classes: Hindustani and all others. He described Hindustani as an admixture of the original languages of Mohammedan conquerors with languages of Hindus. This language was used in government offices and courts and there were excellent grammars, dictionaries and other teaching tools. Hindustani was loosely spread over the surface of the whole country but unknown in rural areas. On the other hand, 'the different dialects of Hindus' belonged to clearly demarcated geographical areas. Given the purpose of the glossary, Wilson was chiefly concerned with languages that had become 'objects of official requisition', i.e., those used by the government and required for employment of civilian officers. He notes that 'the dialects of Assam', along with other languages were now necessary as well. Noting that the previous study of the languages of India was largely voluntary works of individuals, including the missionaries, he argued that these studies ought to be matters of urgent official concern. His approach and agenda was brought to elaborate function at the end

of the nineteenth century when G.A. Grierson, a colonial officer, brought out the *Linguistic Survey of India*.

The modern study of Indian literary history may also be traced to the same century, when it was researched and reflected upon by the early Orientalists. But it is significant that a modern literary historical sensibility developed only in the nineteenth century as part of a gradual movement from merely recording the past to rewriting it within a wider public debate about national origins, linguistic identities and political entitlements. Blackburn and Dalmia stresses that the growth of Indian literary historiography was simultaneous with similar projects to recover and reconstruct the past - the writing of historical novels and the institutionalization of the fields of archaeology, epigraphy, anthropology and folklore (Blackburn and Dalmia: 2004:2). But along with these projects, the systematic study of linguistics was also used in these nation building projects. Interestingly it was used for two contradictory missions of projecting a separate identity for the language as well as establishing a pan-Indian identity at the same time on the basis of the relationship between the languages.

1.4 Colonial language policy and Indian vernaculars

The appropriation of vernaculars into frameworks of western rationality and the subsequent introduction of English and colonial education were chronologically related within the transformative designs of colonial power. However, these did not follow a uniform pattern through the subcontinent. There were significant differences in the duration and sequence of the phases in different provinces. Whereas in Bengal, the orientalist phase preceded official education initiatives by at least a few decades, the establishment of British power at a relatively later date in western India meant the timings of the orientalist and education projects overlapped to significant extent in that region (Naregal: 2002). Likewise in Assam, the educational initiatives preceded to the process of reconstruction and initiation of Assamese language as a modern vernacular. The administrative and educational policy, especially regarding the decisions about the medium of instruction as well as the administrative language had long term implications as it affected the communicative capabilities and choices before intelligentsia of the region.

1.5 History of vernacularization in Indian subcontinent

A vernacular in the pre-modern area may be defined as a language evolved locally from a classical language and which was used locally unlike the cosmopolitan nature of earlier classical language. According to Pollock, the history of vernacularization in the west and the east took similar dynamics (Pollock: 2007:21). The vernacularization process of pre-modern era may be broken down into three interconnected components: literization, literarization and superposition (Ibid: 23). In its general morphology, the literary culture of the Latin world was conditioned by the history of the language itself. Like the western counterpart Latin, written Sanskrit also starts in one country and then began its cosmopolitan journey. It was a kind of 'prestige language' used by the enterprising kings around South Asia for creating a courtly literature.

Earlier the Sanskrit cultural axiom emphasized that literature could be made only in a restricted set of languages, namely, Sanskrit, Prakrit and Apabhramsa(Pollock: 2007: 287). Only these three languages could be used as the medium of the main body of the text, whereas other languages were permitted to be used to produce an imitation of regional speech.

The literary history of South Asia was profoundly shaped by written textuality. However, the history of the written tradition was a socio-cultural phenomenon rather than a purely technological one. The development of written tradition in different vernaculars of the region covers at least three quarters of a millennium from around the late eighth or early ninth century when Kannada, Javanese and Sinhali attained written literarization, to the fourteenth and fifteenth century when written literary tradition had started in Assamese, Bangla, Hindavi, Gwaliyari and Oriya(Pollock: 2007: 304) This development was related to the influence of Sanskrit as well as the process of discontinuity from the language. For example, the importance and prominence of *Kavya* in Sanskrit influenced most of the vernaculars to begin their literary tradition with a *Kavya*. Those Kavyas were still performed orally, but it was an oral performance of a written text. Therefore, the written texts took a foremost position in the early literary traditions of the vernaculars.

1.5.1 The starting point

The problem of pinpointing the exact time of beginning of a vernacular is a complicated one. The different stages of

vernacularization like localization, textualization and literarization are not always distinctly visible. Generally, literary history of the vernaculars project a theory which presupposes that a language has to be developed enough before starting a literary tradition. For example, Assamese literary historiography always ascertains that the Assamese language was well developed at the time of Hema Saraswati or Madhava Kandali.(Neog: 1986: 18). Pollock questions that conviction about the 'developmental cycle' followed by the literary tradition of a vernacular. According to him, the development model works positive neither historically nor ethno historically for literature (Polock: 2007: 284). Similarly the problem of acceptance of the beginning of a vernacular by the local litterateur and linguists is another intriguing one. How categories of culture were created through the vernacularization process, why the memory of one textual beginning was erased in favour of another, and why a particular text was selected by a tradition to be preserved as primal are some of the very elements of vernacularization at work.

The initial remarks on the roles played by the vernaculars or the languages of the place as they were defined by the critics of the time were found in two medieval Indian texts. In *Bhavaprakasana*, a text

on literary and cultural theory written by Saradatanaya, a survey of language and region was incorporated at the end. In this list the author acknowledges the existence of six or seven languages spoken in the vast world where Sanskrit literary culture reigned supreme. The second text which deals with the role of South Asian vernaculars in the contemporary literary culture is the *Manasasolla*, a royal encyclopedia written by king Someswara of northern Karnataka in 1131. Since the languages of place were intimately linked to melody and rhythm, the choice of a language of place was similarly connected with genre. For example, a notable feature of the *Manasollasa*'s conception of crystallizing vernaculars is their restriction to particular genre or social contexts. Some kinds of compositions like *Satpadi* were to be sung only in Kannada, others in Gujarati. Some other compositions were to be sung in mixed languages, such as *Hamsapada.* In this composition, the first half should be sung in Sanskrit and the second half in a language of place. The social contexts decided the style, rhythm and the language of the compositions (Pollock: 2007: 302).

The representations of beginning within the literary tradition themselves and what they believed to be language may give an

insight about the vernacular. From this perspective, the counting of Assamese texts like inscriptions as specimens of Assamese literature in local literary historiography cannot be ignored. The reality of classical axiom of literary-language exclusion and its implications for the early history of vernacularity was confirmed by the inscriptional records where the hesitancy regarding the literization of the vernacular can be observed. In South Asia, attempt to affiliate a *bhasa* with the oldest possible linguistic period is also a hallmark of literary history. Assamese had no presence whatever until the end of fifth century when some deviation from Sanskrit grammar and some non-Sanskrit or local names were found in 'Sanskrit' inscriptions. After being used nominally for documentary purposes in the next five centuries, the first literary use of the vernacular can be observed in the tenth century '*Charyapada*', where some elements of Assamese language were present. But at the same time, it must be noted that this particular text has also been claimed as the first literary work of Bengali, Oriya and Maithili language. While nomenclature like Assamese, Bengali, Oriya or Maithili has to be used to refer to the languages; the linguistic, conceptual and cognitive boundaries that underwrite such terminology must have been blurry until vernacularization itself was

underway and the work of sharpening language differences through production of early texts had begun.

1.5.2 Literarization of the vernaculars

When the regional languages first began to attain literary forms, they were used only for documentary idioms, such as the inscriptional records where Sanskrit with a regional tilt was used. But they were not considered to be worthy enough to be the medium of major literary works. They were located outside the mainstream literary sphere to the realm of the oral forms like songs and ballads. Oral literature, in different regional languages broke free from cosmopolitan tradition much before written literary works. Even after one hundred years of existence of literary tradition in the Assamese language, Sankaradeva and his contemporary litterateurs tried to justify their switch over to Assamese as the medium. They claimed to be well versed in Sanskrit. Still they had to write in Assamese for the benefit of women, *sudras* and *chandalas* who were ignorant and bereft of understanding Sanskrit. They did not dare to introduce new subject or theme or model even for their vernacular writing. Almost all the repertoire of Vaishnavite literature was based on Indian classical literature. The *Ramayana,* the *Mahabharata*, the

Madbhagavadgeeta and *Bhagavat Purana* were the major texts that were translated or adapted to Assamese.

According to a seventeenth century historiography, the Brajabhasa poet Nanddas "sang" the tenth book of the *Bhagavata* "in vernacular verse". When the Brahmin reciters of lore and Bhagavata exegetes of Mathura complained to Vitthalnath, the spiritual preceptor of Nanddas about the possible disappearance of their livelihood because of the vernacular *Bhagavata,* he ordered Nanddas to immerse the entire book except the *rasalila* section to the river Yamuna (Gupta: 1947:146). In this account, the dispute concerns not the authority to speak spirituality in the vernacular. It concerns written vernacular literariness which threatened the literary-cultural power based on Sanskrit and a class of bilingual intermediaries. But in the case of Assamese language, the situation was more complex than *Brajabhasa.* When Sakaradeva started to propagate the neo-*Vaishnava* religion in Assam, he already contested the spiritual authority of Brahmins. To diminish their control over the spiritual texts, he had started his project of translating major religious tracts to a more common language. He had got the Assamese *Ramayana* as the model for his translation

project, but he chose a language having more trans-regional appeal. In fact, his choice of the language *Brajavali*, a mixture of Assamese with some features from other North and East Indian vernaculars served two purposes. *Brajavali* gave a religious flavour to the texts as well as it became viable for exposure to the entire Vaishnavite community of Northern and Eastern India.

An expansion of the vernaculars in the 'post-cosmopolitan era' or post-Sanskrit era occurred but in an altogether different order of magnitude. The vernacular Assamese must developed from a regional dialect into an almost unified medium for literary and political discourse over Assam and its neighbourhood. Most of the intellectuals who cultivated the language clearly understood these spatial limitations and harboured no illusions about its universalization. They defined a literary culture in conscious opposition to some larger world and created a localized literature. Madhava Kandali, the fourteenth century translator of the *Ramayana* adapted the classic to local environment, language and culture. On the other hand, Sankaradeva, the fifteenth century Vaishnavite saint and litterateur of Assam must have larger aspirations about his

creation and his use of *Brajavali* had the potentiality of becoming trans-regional.

The objective dimensions of writing in vernacular against writing in Sanskrit were also registered within the subjective universes of the vernacular writers. To participate in the Sanskrit literary culture was to participate in a vast world of cultural communication and self understanding; to produce a vernacular version or alternative was to confine oneself to a smaller space and breaking with the outer world. Some took a middle path. They produced Sanskrit and vernacular texts simultaneously for reaching to the outer and the inner space at the same time.

The transition to the written or manuscript culture changed the mindset of common people about the authenticity and authority of literature. Earlier, vernacular literature was associated with orality and classical literature was associated with written culture. After being written, vernacular literature also entered the mainstream of literature. It had an authoritative and almost magical significance in oral societies. Manuscripts were kept at a sacred place and they were worshiped as deities. For the oral performer too, manuscript

was a means of legitimizing his oral text. Of course, none of the above should suggest a clean and permanent break between the oral and written. To the contrary, the ongoing interaction between the oral and the written constitutes one of the most remarkable and unique features of Assamese literary culture. The interplay between these two traditions was a complex scene where oral compositions could be literized and vice versa. For example the cases of the *Ojapali* tradition and the *Kirtana* may be analyzed. The *Ojapali*, one of the most popular performing genres of Assamese folklore, earlier used oral texts like *Padmapuran* and then converted it to written manuscripts. On the other hand, *Kirtana*, one of the most popular texts of the Vaishnavites of Assam, had been transmitted orally to the illiterate population despite having a written text.

In India, despised manuscripts were generally destroyed by immersing to rivers unlike the west where such manuscripts were burnt. But in Assam, we have seen the western as well as the Indian way for destruction of manuscripts. Kirtichandra Barbarua, an Ahom minister burnt a numbers of the manuscripts of *Buranjis*, the Assamese chronicles as it contained derogatory comments on his

ancestors. On the other hand, a lot of manuscripts were immersed to protect their sanctity during the Burmese invasion.

To employ the vernaculars in producing literary and political texts and to place those alongside classical languages required a new disciplinary focus as well as a new discourse on the local languages. These had to be developed in grammar and lexicography where a newly theorized category about the local language as well as its newly found cultural authority may come into being. But the vernacular philology was not typical to all the vernaculars of the region. In Kannada, Javanese, Sinhali and Tibbetan languages the discipline of philology was flourished at the behest of the court elites (Pollock: 2007:396). But the North Indian vernacular intellectuals did not follow their South Indian counterparts' suite. The history of development of North Indian vernacular philology had quite specific and much narrower routes. One of the most interesting facts about the development in the north is that no grammaticization whatsoever was produced in any of the vernaculars of the region. None of the local North Indian languages had a written grammar until the colonial period. Even in Maharashtra, where a number of Sanskrit grammars were written,

the Marathi language was almost entirely ignored. There is only a short list of Marathi case-endings included in a language manual in the fourteenth century. In Bengal, the Sanskrit *tol*s concentrated around Nabadweep did not pay any attention to discipline the local vernacular as it was considered to be the language of the non-elite class. Except a vocabulary by Ruchinath Kamrupi (1810) in the early nineteenth century, there was not any grammatical or lexicographical work to be found in Assamese in the pre-colonial period. This absence may be the result of the interplay between several linguistic and non-linguistic phenomena. The conceptual haziness of the near Sanskrit languages, reflected in the fact that several languages including Assamese had no stable name. This may be one reason why the vernacular intellectuals in these languages were not interested in producing vernacular grammars and vocabularies. Moreover, most of the pre-colonial vernacular intellectuals were also very well versed in Sanskrit as this was considered to be the only suitable medium of education. The philology of vernacular was not included in the pre-colonial curricula. For example, at the *tol* of Mahendra Kandali, Sankaradeva studied four *Vedas,* fourteen *shastras*, eighteen *puranas*, the Mahabharata, fourteen Sanskrit grammars, eighteen *kavyas* and eighteen *tantras*

and the medium of education was invariably Sanskrit (Neog: 1999: 24). Hence, the absence of vernacular grammar was not felt at that time. The status of the vernaculars was not very high and vernacular writings were generally meant for the unlettered and the lower casts of the society. Both Sankaradeva and Bhattadeva clarified that their translations and adaptations were mainly targeted at *Stree or* women, *Sudras or lower casts* and *Chandalas or 'untouchables'*. That said, there was no doubt a philological elaboration of these vernaculars which were not codified in written grammars and dictionaries. There were instances of critical assessment about spelling mistakes or grammatical mistakes in the Assamese manuscripts. Once, Madhavadeva, the famous litterateur of the fifteenth- sixteenth century complained about replacement of one consonant with another and vice versa by copyist in one of his manuscripts (Pathak: 1985: 9).

Around the same time, the vernacular writers began to alter the rules of the cultural theory game. The differentiation of the cultures of Place from the culture of placeless Sanskrit was elsewhere being made by means of the practices of the great way and of particular places. It is in the domain of literature and particularly in the literary theory of southern intellectuals that the rationality and regionality

found their clearest expression. The Kannada vernacular intellectuals for the first time redeployed the term *marga* to define the ways of vernacular writing. In Telugu literary culture *marga* and *desi* were used in the tenth and eleventh centuries to refer to Sanskrit and Telugu respectively. Not everywhere, of course, nor consistently were literary phenomena rethought according to the new cosmopolitan-vernacular distinction. The differentiation between the Sanskritized version and localized version of the vernacular literature was not always defined or followed. In Assamese, most of the medieval Vaishnavite litterateurs tried to follow the Sanskritized Ways. On the other hand, the deviations or deficiencies of their work were defended on the ground of the limitations of the writer himself. Madhava Kandali, in his *Ramayana,* defended the differences with the Valmiki *Ramayana* on two grounds. The first one was the incapability on his part to translate exactly – Birds can fly according to the strength of their wings (Sharma: 1998: 245). Secondly, Kandali asserted that the poet had to adapt some elements of his own as well as folk expressions or *loka vyavahara.* Hence the readers should not find fault with it always (ibid: 245).

The historical beginning of vernacular traditions had a strong sense of breaking with the past to produce a new cultural and

linguistic identity. It is almost everywhere promoted and practiced by those who exercised either political or religious power. The medieval religious consciousness and the religious movement widely known as *Bhakti* or devotional movement was the force behind the vernacular revolution. The Bhakti exponents in different parts of India used their local language as the base for their religious texts. Some scholars hold that the gradual separation of the emerging literatures of the vernacular languages from the high Sanskrit tradition to be traced to religious developments hostile to the Sanskrit based Brahminical tradition, against which the vernacular literatures made an undeclared revolution (Kaviraj: 1992). It is also assumed that the vernacular revolution is anti-Brahminical in nature. On the other hand, there is a second opinion which holds that the first opinion exaggerates the importance of religion in the vernacularization process. More decisive than religious affiliation as a factor in the literary language choice was the literary system as such, especially the requirements of genre and aesthetic register (Pollock: 2007: 424).

The study of early Assamese literary history presents some curious facts about the context of the beginning of vernacular

literature in the language. Here, vernacular literature had started much ahead of the advent of the *Bhakti* movement. The vernacular literarization of thirteenth and fourteenth centuries Assam were free from any preaching of the fifteenth century Vaishnavite literature. For example Madhava Kandali emphasizes that the *story* he describes is *loukika* or human story (Sharma: 1998: 245). Later, at the insistence of his spiritual mentor Sankaradeva, Madhavadeva edited this text by giving it an overall devotional touch as well as by adding two more chapters written by himself and his mentor. Most of the pre-Sankara vernacular writers such as Madhava Kandali and Haribar Bipra were Brahmins who initiated vernacular writings in Assamese. In fact, Kandali was the first person who translated the Ramayana into a northern or eastern Indian vernacular. Political patronage, rather than religious zeal prompted the early Assamese writers to use vernacular as their literary medium. *Barahi* king Mahamanikya commissioned Madhava Kanadali to translate The *Ramayana* into Assamese so that it could be understood by everyone – *sarvajana-bodhe.* Haribar Bipra and Hema Saraswati also mentioned their political patron's name in their works.

This argument does not imply that the new religious movements that arose at a later date did not have a substantial impact on literary cultures and their regionalization of cultural life. The point is to try to gauge these consequences with greater historical and theoretical precision. The hypothesis that the new religious consciousness and devotionalism in particular, constituted the very basis of vernacularization in South Asia makes it more difficult to understand the earlier or later religio-cultural transformations. A more detailed account of the literary history of different vernaculars in the second millennium would show that there were several vernacular revolutions. One was the cosmopolitan in its register and without the devotionalism as the *Ramayana* by Madhava Kandali. Another one can be defined by its cosmopolitan register and with the spirit of devotionalism such as the Vaishnavite literature in Assamese. The third may be termed as regional, both for the regional flavour as well as the non-Sanskritic *desi* idioms such as the *panchali* literature in Assamese. The second revolution is unthinkable and also not possible without the first revolution. The third one was going on simultaneously with the second one and it can be termed as a counter-revolution to the second one. These lyrical works, written for oral performances, neither followed Sanskrit literary dictum nor the

cosmopolitan *raga* system. They were also free from Vaishnavism which was the prominent trend in mainstream vernacular literature of that period.

It goes without saying that the trend toward vernacular polity was not everywhere uniform or similar. In general, the medieval polity acknowledged the political role of the vernacular languages just like the ancient emperor Asoka, who used different regional varieties of language for communication with different parts of his empire. As a form of political communication, Vijayanagara kingdom, for example, issued inscriptions in the languages of different areas that came under its rule (Pollock: 2007: 420). In Assam, pre-medieval kings used cosmopolitan Sanskrit language as their political language as they have diplomatic relations with other northern and eastern political states. The Hindu kings of Assam, who reigned from fourth to twelfth century, used Sanskrit for documentation. After Ahom and Koch Kings came into power, the choice of political language entered a different league.

A gradual vernacularization of political process can be clearly observed, most distinctly in the documentary text production but also

in the increasingly sharper definitions of geo-cultural landscapes in different forms of literary-cultural discourse. In fact, this dimension of the cosmopolitan vernacular as well as the *laukika* cultural and political values it represented may have been part of what the regional-vernacular revolution was targeting. It may also interesting to note that most of the Indian vernaculars were using poetry as the medium.

As a descriptive term in linguistics, the idea of Sanskritization merely points a set of processes whereby phonology and morphology of a language aspired to the condition of Sanskrit. It does not explain what this aspiration meant for language as a symbolic or social system. We know that northern Buddhists sanskritized their dialects in linguistic terms. In Assamese vernacular this trend is sometimes visible such as the early prose translation of the *Srimadbhagavatageeta* and the *Bhagavata* by Bhattadeva in the sixteenth century. Bhattadeva, a Sanskrit scholar and author, used Sanskritized Assamese language in both of his creations. He did not explain why he had to use such a prose style in his literary work which was not targeted for scholars but for the common illiterate people. But his fascination with Sanskrit may be associated with his training in the language as well as his desire to

protect the sanctity of the original text which might be 'diluted' with the use of pure vernacular linguistic features.

Colonial rule brought about the abrupt end of the previous period of gradual evolution of literary style as well as the language. It is well-known that colonial rule was able to alter textual norms, networks of patronage and dissemination, and the ways in which the natives described and assessed their world. The introduction of English as a part of the colonial language and education policy, and systematic study of the vernaculars were some of the apparatuses used by the colonizers in the sub-continent for the implementation of their larger project.

The social history of the Assamese language can be approached as a study of how the speech-community uses it and how the issues of political and social processes, authority and identity were attached to the status of the language in the nineteenth century. This thesis is concerned with the role of colonial knowledge in the construction of the language as a modern vernacular. It also tries to understand how the language was construed by the power of a foreign regime into the bounded institution.

1.6 Review of literature

The role of language in the making of a national identity has become a source of major discussion for historians, linguists as well as social scientists in the late twentieth century. They have placed language at the centre of the political interplay of administration and intelligentsia..The works of Benedict Anderson (1991) and Edward Said (1978, 1993) are indicative of such new beginning.

Recent research has shown some of the major cultural and political shifts in the nineteenth century India through the colonial philology. As the language is the foundation of most of the forms of cultural practice, the importance of focusing on language while mapping major shifts seems most important. The transformation of traditional societies into modern communities has been accompanied by corresponding linguistic modernization. One important feature of a traditional society is that it shows extremes of internal linguistic diversity. For example, a classical or foreign language may be used for administration and religious practices whereas common people generally use one or two varieties of local dialects. The gap between the literary language and the spoken one

tends to be reduced with the advancement towards modernity. Bernard Cohn (1985)] and Stuart Blackburn (2003) have discussed about the nature of the colonial intervention on the languages of India.

Elizabeth Eisentistein (1979), Roger Chartier (1989) and others have taken the lead in interpreting the impact of print in the modernization of Europe. Recent works on Indian vernaculars have also stressed the need for the interdisciplinary study to understand the problem of vernacular better. These works have largely focused in the areas of colonialism, the cultural dynamics of the society and the intellectual milieu. These studies, too, have placed the problem of Indian vernaculars in the context of Indian nationalism. Christopher King(1994), Veena Naregal (2001), Sheldon Pollock (2003), Stuart Blackburn (2003), Anindita Ghosh (2006), Lisa Mitchell (2009), Farina Mir (2010), Gautam Bhadra (2011) and others discussed the transition process of different Indian vernaculars in the backdrop of colonialism and nationalism. They also deliberated on the role played by western education, print and local traditions in the shaping of the vernaculars.

In Assamese context, mainly three distinct trends of studies on the Assamese language could be noticed. Like most of the other Indian vernaculars, the linguistic study of Assamese had started only in the colonial period. In Assam it was coincided with the displacement of the language as an official medium. Simultaneously, missionaries and colonial bureaucrats started to deliberate to accord the status of Assamese - whether it was a dialect of Bengali or an independent language. The American missionaries such as Nathan Brown and Miles Bronson produced several language tools to prove that Assamese was an independent language which was greatly contested by colonial officers like William Robinson. However leading Assamese literati Hemchandra Barua opposed the missionary project of distancing the Assamese grammar and orthography from Sanskrit. In the late nineteenth century, this study was mainly concentrated around its relationship with the Bengali language. Contemporary litterateurs like Gunabhiram Barua, Lakshminath Bezbaroa and Hemchandra Goswami led these discussions and debates. In the early twentieth century G.A. Grierson projected the Assamese language in a pan- Indian context. Later linguists like Kaliram Medhi (1936), Debananda Bharali

(1912), Banikanta Kakati (1941) and others discussed about the origin and the evolution of the Assamese language.

The second category consists of Assamese literary histories where the origin and evolution of the Assamese language have been discussed by literary historians to pinpoint the start of Assamese literary tradition. Dimbeswar Neog (1962), Maheswar Neog (1962), Satyendra Nath Sarma (1981), Tilottama Misra (1987), and Nagen Saikia (1988) have also deliberated about the displacement of the Assamese language in the early colonial Assam.

More recently sociological as well other literary writings are also covering the language question as it has become evident that language had played a major role in colonial as well as independent Assam. For example, Sibanath Barman and Prasenjit Choudhury have tried to highlight the role played by the imperial divide and rule policy as key a reason behind the displacement of Assamese language while others like Jogendra Narayan Bhuyan reemphasized the argument advocated by Bezbaroa and others. Historical writings on the nineteenth century viz., H.K. Borpujari and Amalendu Guha , however are not convinced with the latter argument.

1.7 Objective of the study

The primary aim of the proposed work is to understand the complex history of modern Assamese language. This work will examine the problematic of the emergence of a modern form of standard vernacular in the condition of coloniality and nationalism and thus it has focused largely in the nineteenth century. It will also examine how the interplay of colonialism, nationalism and existing cultural tradition shaped the modern literary history of Assam. The making of the Assamese, as a modern vernacular was the result of a few interconnected phenomena. The colonial language policy, the history of Assamese grammar and Assamese lexicography, and the history of Assamese newspapers and journals are representatives of these phenomena. Detailed study of these interconnected events will help in throwing some light on the making of the modern Assamese vernacular. The nineteenth century works on Assamese grammar and lexicography had provided a much needed framework for the beginning of the career of the Assamese as a modern vernacular. Many colonial officials, missionaries and local people carried out rigorous works on the linguistic aspects of the Assamese language. These debates surrounding the philological aspects of the

Assamese language has given a firm shape in the formation of the modern Assamese language. This work is going to study the impact created by these debates and other works in shaping an agenda for the emerging Assamese vernacular as a modern and standard language and an identity marker for the Assamese nationalists. On the other hand, the print medium, a by-product of colonialism, too contributed a large corpus of old and new Assamese literature that reinstated Assamese as modern vernacular. The language that was developed through these media contributed to the growth of the language suitable for modern literary tradition. Several oral forms of literature also got printed in these media. This transformation of orality into a printed form also had some endurable impact on the modern Assamese language and literature. A standard reading public was created by the new history of printed book in the nineteenth century Assam. That reading public also immensely contributed and influenced the course of the standardization of the modern Assamese vernacular. This work is going to examine how the emergence of modern Assamese print culture gave shape to the Assamese language which served the causes of nationalism, culture and politics.

1.8 Methodology

This work has been basically an interdisciplinary study focusing on history, linguistics and folkloristics. It has followed the methodology of social science which consists of data collection and their analysis. The data have been collected from various primary and secondary sources and it involved chiefly the library and archival works as the study is historical. Various primary sources including official records, essays, memorandum and other relevant official transactions have been collected from the Assam State Archive, Guwahati. Analyzing the considerable number of journals, text-books, grammars, dictionaries and vocabularies, biographies and autobiographies, fictions and drama in Assamese published in the nineteenth century is essential for understanding the shaping of the Assamese language in that century. These primary sources have been collected from different libraries and digital archives. The first edition of various nineteenth century tracts and also manuscripts has been collected from the Asia and Africa collection of the British Library at London.

This study used a numbers of primary and secondary sources obtained from different archives and libraries. As the study is based

on the social history of the nineteenth century, the primary sources were from that century. Official records of that period have been mostly obtained from the state archive itself. However, most of the books of that century, mainly the first editions are generally not found in Assam. Those materials were obtained from the British library.

Secondary sources for the study included the literary histories of the Assamese language as well as other Indian languages; works on the impact of coloniality and nationality on Indian and other non-indian languages; works on the emergence of print, books and reading public; and general books on this area.

The data thus collected and analyzed using historical and socio-linguistic methodology. Folkloristic methodology has been used to understand the transition of orality to printing of folklore materials and the impact of incorporating these printed texts in literary histories. Lastly, this study uses the qualitative approach to analyze the problematic.

1.9 Scope of the study

This thesis proposes to analyze the complex interplay of colonial language and education policy along with the missionary linguistic strategies with local intelligentsia's linguistic stand and project to realize the aspiration of bringing a national identity on the basis of a vernacular. It also proposes to establish that the standardization of Assamese vernacular in the late nineteenth century was the outcome of these inter-related phenomena.

This thesis has been divided into six chapters. The first chapter attempts to analyze the pre-colonial process of vernacularization as well as literarizattion process of the Assamese vernacular in a pan-Indian context. The pre-colonial Assamese literary tradition was immensely beneficial in establishing Assamese as an independent language in the nineteenth century Assam.

The second chapter explores three interrelated themes in the linguistic scenario of colonial Assam by examining colonial language policy adopted in the province in nineteenth century. It examines the relationship between language and colonial governance; the tension between colonial administrative power with the missionaries and local intelligentsia; and the limits of colonial power. Exploration of

these interrelated themes elucidates important dimensions of Assam's nineteenth century social history and the shaping of the Assamese language as a modern vernacular.

The third chapter analyzes the impact of the colonial apparatus print on the nineteenth century Assamese language and literature. Print also helped in making a new reading public who actively participated in the public debates and discussions and also the debates that were taking place in the emerging public spheres.

The fourth chapter analyzes the transition process of Assamese folklore materials from orality to print. This chapter tries to highlight colonial as well as native project of collecting and printing folklore in the nineteenth century Assam and the implication of this project in Assamese language and literature. It also examines the role of folklore in the debate on tradition and modernity in the nineteenth century.

The fifth chapter concentrates on the impact of hybridity that invariably comes with colonialism on the Assamese language and vice versa. It explores how and why institutions of civil society came to champion Assamese culture in the second half of the nineteenth century. It also examines the heated debates about the ways in which intellectuals attempted to define and make known the wider

meaning of national symbols and culture with the help of a 'modern' language.

The sixth and last chapter concludes the general arguments spelled out in this works. It highlights on the choice of the language in the early colonial Assam, colonial intervention and subsequent standardization process of the Assamese language and the emergence of the Assamese language as an identity marker.

Chapter II

Colonial Enterprise: Predicament of a Language

2.1 Introduction

The appropriation of vernaculars and knowledge into frameworks of western rationality and the subsequent introduction of English and colonial education were chronologically related within the transformative design of the colonial power. However, these did not follow a uniform pattern throughout the sub-continent. There were significant differences in the duration and sequence of initiatives by at least a quarter of a century. The establishment of British power at a relatively later date in western India meant the timing of the orientalist and education projects overlapped to significant extent in that region (Naregal: 2001). In Assam, the educational initiatives preceded to the process of stabilization and standardization of modern Assamese vernacular in the later decades of the nineteenth century. The administrative and education policy, especially regarding decisions on the medium of administration and instruction,

had long term implications as it affected the communicative capabilities and choices before the intelligentsia of the region.

The process of decay and stabilization of the Assamese language was the result of interplay between a few linguistic and non-linguistic phenomena in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. It is well known that colonial rule was able to alter textual norms, networks of patronage and dissemination, and the ways the Assamese people described and assessed their world. Moreover, it altered the notions of political space, subjectiveness, and collective identities of the sub-continent, displacing and appropriating the existing notions. And it had been long established that language is a critical arena for the operation of colonial power (Cohn: 1985). Fabian has showed that colonial codification, patronage and appropriation of Swahili in Belgian-controlled Congo was crucial for maintaining colonial control over the indigenous workforce needed to exploit Congo's natural resources (Fabian: 1966). Anderson stresses on the impact of language and print capital on the making of the political imagination in different societies (Anderson: 1991).

In India too, the colonial government used the Indian languages for the consolidation of their knowledge about the country and command over the people of the sub-continent. Bayly illustrates that access to information rested on the company officials' linguistic competence in Sanskrit, Persian and regional vernaculars (Bayly: 1996). East India company officials, therefore, had to learn, codify and then teach Indian languages in a systematic way. These languages were taught at colonial institutions in both of India and England to the aspiring colonial officials in eighteenth and nineteenth century. It was mandatory for the officials to have competence in minimum one Indian language. Such practices helped colonial officials gain the 'command of language' that was crucial for the consolidation of power in India (Cohn:1992: 30) Hence, an examination of colonial language policy can help to elucidate on colonial power structure and their larger aim at political control. This chapter will explore three interrelated themes in the linguistic scenario of colonial Assam by examining colonial language policy adopted in the province in the nineteenth century. These themes are: (a) the relationship between language and colonial governance; (b) the tension between colonial administrative power with the missionaries and local intelligentsia; and (c) the limits of

colonial power. These themes reveal specific aspects of colonial enterprise and elucidate important dimensions of Assam's nineteenth century social history, especially linguistic history.

Language played a crucial role in realizing the governmental ideal about the legal and just rule in the early nineteenth century. The colonial officials across India, from the turn of the century, insisted that Indians should be governed in the languages that were easily understood by them. Translating into Persian everything told by the natives in their own languages at the colonial court was a tedious and time consuming process. It also hampered the direct communication between the ruler and the ruled which was against the ideal of just governance. This changing attitude can be located in the Act No. 29 of 1837, which prescribed provincial level governance through vernacular languages. From the turn of 1837, therefore, the predominant vernacular of the province was used as the official language at provincial level administration.

The history of the company's language policy in Assam, however, presents a counter-example of the general trend of the company which propagated the use of local vernacular at least for

the local administration. Colonial language policy in Assam instituted Bengali as the official language of the province rather than Assamese, the most predominant vernacular of the region. This was against the imperial language policy and the political ideology that stressed the idea of just and legitimate colonial governance.

A careful examination of the language policy adopted in early nineteenth century Assam points to some astonishing phenomena in both cultural and social milieu. When the colonial administration instituted an unfamiliar official language in Assam, it affected the Assamese language and Assamese society in several ways. It led to the predicament of the Assamese language at the initial phase. However, the cultural production, from print culture to colloquial language, thrived through the period of displacement of Assamese which is a pointer to the limitation of colonial authority.

2.2 Colonial language policy of India

After the East India Company began to administer Indian territories politically, they did not change their predecessors' language policy abruptly. They continued with Persian at the provincial level

administration though English was used for highest level administration. This policy continued till the 1830s when vernaculars of the provinces replaced Persian as the official languages at the provincial level. This critical shift in colonial language policy was not altogether surprising, given the nature of the early nineteenth century colonial discourse on vernacular languages (Mir: 2006:399). However, as early as 1750, the Company had exhorted its employees "not only to learn the Persick but also the other languages of the country"(Blackburn: 2003:91). In an 1802 letter to India's Governor General, the court of the Directors of the Company hinted about the shift in the language policy and the growing importance of vernacular languages:

> An intimate acquaintance with the Languages of the Country, and as competent [a]knowledge of the Laws and Regulations ... are in our opinion most essential qualifications, and indeed indispensable for the conduct of public business in every department of our Government. Of three languages current on the Bengal side of India the Persian and the Hindostanny are necessary for the transaction of business in all offices; with respect to he Bengalese or provincial Language ...we conceive that the knowledge of it will be found indispensibly [sic] requisite to the provincial Collectors; nor less to the Civil Judges.[1]

This letter was an indicator of the changing attitude of the Company's policy makers towards the role of language in the governance of the colony. The Court acknowledged the utility of the existing language policy in which Persian was the official language of courts and revenue proceedings and Hindustani or Urdu was the widely used medium of communication between the Europeans and the natives. Besides these two languages, the Court stressed on the importance of the "languages of the country". It also suggested that proficiency in vernacular languages would be a pre-requisite for office.[2] The letter reiterated the Company's early nineteenth century language policy that maintained Persian as the official language; Hindustani as a medium of communication and vernacular languages, though they did not have any official role, were considered to be crucial for colonial governance. The same sentiment was echoed from the India based Company officials too. Some officers from different provinces emphasized vernacular languages as an important tool for effective and just governance. For example, in an 1805 public notice, officials at Fort St. George declared that the Company would not "appoint any Civil Servant to the situation of Judge or Collector, who shall not be found to have an adequate degree of proficiency in one of the following native

languages- viz. the Tamil, the Telinga [sic], the Canarese [sic], or the language of the province of Malabar."[3] In the same letter, the officials reiterated the importance of local vernacular over Persian or Hindustani:

> We attached considerable importance to the study of Hindoostanee & Persian Languages. But highly meritorious as we should ... consider the acquirement of them; we did not deem them so absolutely necessary as the vernacular languages of the Country.[4]

From the beginning of nineteenth century, the aspiring British civil servants, fresh from England, were required to learn Indian languages. Three Colleges were set up during the first two decades for language teaching, two in India and one in England. In 1800, the College of Fort William was set up at Calcutta and after studying one or more Indian Classical or modern vernacular for three years in the college, the new recruits were sent to their posts in one of the three Presidencies. The second such College was the East India College at Haileybury in England where for sometime the first two years of language and other administrative training were held for the aspiring civil servants. The scheme was changed again and the new recruits selected for posts in Madras Presidency were sent directly to Madras for their final year training which led to the establishment of

the College of Fort St. George in 1812. This College was set up with the purpose of redirecting the language learning away from the classical languages. Nonetheless, the acquisition of South Indian vernaculars by civil servants were not up to marks. In 1812, the 'Committee for the Improvement of the Study of the Native Languages by the Junior Civil Servants', set up to examine junior civil servants in the native languages reported only "two instances of uncommon proficiency in the Tenegu[sic.] and Tamil, the study of which is... much more important than of any other of the native languages".[5] Trautmann explains that most of the new recruits had started on Persian and Hindustani at Haileybury and they tended to continue with those languages in Madras though they were of limited use in south India (Trautman: 2006: 48-49). The Fort St. George officials offered two solutions: the study of south Indian languages should be promoted at Haileybury and the existing system of financially rewarding the linguistic competence should be re-oriented to the competence of south Indian vernaculars.[6] This re-orientation was built into college regulations, which stipulated that civil servants must first pass an examination in Tamil, Telegu, Kannada or Malayalam before being able to get a further financial award for the study of Sanskrit, Persian, Hindustani or Arabic. Therefore, the

College at Fort St. George, unlike Fort William, gave preference to the study of Indian vernaculars. Though the goal was to redirect the study away from the study of Indian classical languages, the college explained that "it was not the aim to neglect them altogether" since these languages were used in legal and revenue proceedings (Blackburn: 2003: 91). Despite the projected governmental importance of Indian vernaculars, official language policy remained unchanged till the 1830s. Meanwhile, the use of vernaculars was additional to the existing language policy and it depended on the proficiency level of the officials in the local vernacular.

By the 1830s, a shift in the colonial attitude towards language policy was distinctly visible. Persian had been finally officially abandoned in Bombay and Madras presidencies by 1832. In Madras, the language policy was changed after a prolonged debate grounded both in India and England. This debate highlighted the changed ideals of the nature of just governance, honest administration and efficiency. In an 1835 letter, the Court of Directors wrote to the Bengal judicial department about the impending abandonment of Persian in judicial proceedings as it "forms a barrier between the European functionaries and the

Natives: it multiplies facilities for dishonest practices on the part of the Native Officers attached to our courts [and it] embarrasses the transaction of every description of the business."[7] This sentiment was echoed in an 1836 minute by the Governor General Auckland where he noted that Persian was not a colloquial language in any part of Company territory. Hence, to retain it as the language of the court was to keep "the bulk of people in ignorance of the judicial proceedings which they may hear or to which they may be parties".[8] The obvious remedy was to abolish Persian in the Bengal Presidency, where it was still the official language of the courts and revenue proceedings. The decision about the replacement was taken after getting the opinions of the European officers of the presidency. Most of the officers strongly opposed replacing Persian with the predominant vernaculars of the presidency, namely, Bengali, Oriya and Hindustani. They charged that those vernacular languages were not standardized and they were 'uncouth', barren and 'unadapted' to the conduct of judicial proceedings (Mir: 2006:43). Some of the officials felt that finding enough officers competent in local vernaculars to run the business of the courts would be impossible. Despite opposition from most of the officers

that vernaculars were ill-suited for administration, a resolution was passed on the fourth of September, 1837, which declared:

> ...it to be just and reasonable that those Judicial and Fiscal Proceedings on which the dearest interest of the Indian people depend should be conducted in a language which they understand...[He] is therefore disposed... to substitute the Vernacular languages of the country for the Persian in legal proceedings and in proceedings relating to the revenue.[9]

The resolution was passed in November as Act No.XXIX of 1837 and Persian was officially replaced by Bengali, Oriya and Urdu or Hindustani in Bengal Presidency. However, it was an all India act and it set a precedent for future language policy throughout India. It ensured that from 1837 onwards, vernacular languages would be the medium of colonial governance except at the highest level (Mir: 2006:404).

The main factor behind the changed policy was attributed to the concern for just rule. However, Mir has suggested that financial matters also played a crucial role in this change. The Court of Directors believed that the changed language policy would eliminate the need of translation between vernacular languages and Persian and hence it would be financially expedient. Though the colonial

authority tried to downplay the fiscal matters by stating that it would be of a small degree, but official correspondences reflected a greater economic concern (Mir: 2006:404).

2.3 Language policy of colonial Assam

2.3.1 The language policy adopted in Assam did not follow the pan-Indian uniformity projected by the 1837 Act. The tensions between the notion of ideal rule and ground reality became clear in the changing language policy in nineteenth century colonial Assam. It also brought forward the issues colonial government had to handle during the thirty six years of linguistic instability such as the difference between a dialect and a language, the preference of one language over another; differences between speakers of different dialects, differences of opinions among the colonial officials about the choice between the native vernacular and the official language of the province, and a prolonged debate between the colonial government and the colonial missionaries and native intelligentsia.

The East India Company annexed Assam after the Yandabo treaty with the King of Burma in 1826. However, five districts of

Assam, namely Kamrup, Darrang, Nowgong, Sibsagar and Lakhimpur came under British occupation in 1825 itself when the East India Company had entered into Assam at the request of the Ahom king to fight away the Burmese invaders. By 1854, direct British rule was uniformly introduced and stabilized over the entire territory (Banerjee: 1992:123). Assam was incorporated into the Bengal Presidency and the colonial administration followed the same policy as the Bengal province. The Bengal Presidency authority was also responsible for choosing the language of administration and the medium of instruction in the province of Assam. One of the first responsibilities of the Company was to determine the language of provincial administration.

2.3.2 The language policy in colonial Assam experienced at least three changes during the colonial period. After annexation of Assam in 1826, several languages were used in the courts till the 1830s. Until 1837, when the Act No. 29 propagated a uniform language policy, the colonial administration used Persian and English language at different levels of administration. In a petition to A.J. Moffat Mills, Anandaram Dhekial Phukan noted that "for more than ten years after the annexation of the Province, the Assamese was

the language of the Courts" and it was also used "with great facility and convenience, and with universal satisfaction to the people" in other departments of public offices (Neog: 1977: 119). Official records from that period, to some extent, substantiated Dhekial Phukan's claim about the use of Assamese in public offices (Bhuyan: 1990:2-3). But Assamese was not the official language as Anandaram claimed. Some other sources recorded that in April, 1831, the government replaced Persian with Bengali as the court language on the ground that it was very difficult and too costly to have replacement when a Persian Scribe was on leave or left the service (Barpujari:1980 :266). David Scott introduced Bengali also as the medium of the newly established schools in the Brahmaputra valley as "it differs but little from the language of Assam".[10] However, James Metthie, the collector of Guwahati, found in 1835, that the language taught was Sanskrit in schools in Darrang (Barpujari: 1992: 351). Francis Jenkins, Commissioner of Assam, on the other hand, believed that the introduction of Bengali as the court language had been taken on an even earlier date when the conquest of Assam became probable and Scott was stationed at Goalpara (Long: 1855: 170). The claim was supported by two documents dated as early as eleventh March, 1825 and cited by Henry

Hopkinson, commissioner of Assam who succeeded Jenkins in 1861, which showed that the administrative language of that period was Bengali.[11] This policy was continued till 1837 when Persian was officially replaced with Bengali as the official language of the province.

According to the precedent set by Act 29, the colonial authority should have chosen Assamese. But it did not happen for the next three decades. Bengali was undoubtedly a vernacular language, hence it held the letter of the law, but it was primarily the vernacular of the adjoining Bengal, not of Assam. The choice, therefore, clearly contravened the spirit of Act 29. After much resentment from the Assamese intelligentsia and American Baptist Missionaries, Assamese was finally instituted as the official language of the courts and the medium of instruction in 1873.

What was the reason that motivated the colonial authority's choices of official language in Assam? Why was Assamese ignored though different colonial sources, as it documented below, had already identified Assamese as the language or dialect spoken by the majority of the province's inhabitants? Why was Bengali chosen

as the official administrative language and the medium of instruction? What were the consequences of this language policy in Assamese society? What does it reveal about the colonialism? How did the choice of official language in the nineteenth century colonial Assam affect the relations between two speech communities even today? Much were written and debated on these issues in the literary history of Assam[12]. In fact this problem of displacement of Assamese language has occupied a central problematic in the academic as well as political rhetoric of the province.

2.3.3 Although in some parts of India colonial philology of this stage was something of a developed science, such knowledge was rudimentary in those areas which were recently brought under colonial control. However, the little linguistic information available to colonial officials at that moment already identified Assamese as the 'spoken language' or 'dialect' used by a majority of the inhabitants of the province. But it may also be noted that Assamese was conceptualized as a dialect or a corrupt version of Bengali which could influence the future language policy of the government. The term dialect, jargon or spoken language was almost always associated with the description of Assamese language by the

colonial writers of early nineteenth century[13]. A serious discussion on Assamese language had been started by the missionaries in the third decade of the nineteenth century only. Earlier accounts on Assam generally covered political and geographical aspects of the province and there were only a few passing comments about the language of the province. British missionaries published Assamese books but did not consider Assamese as a major Eastern language.

However, the existence of Assamese language was acknowledged much before the annexation of Assam by colonial sources. It had started with the journals and accounts by colonial officials, written mainly for the benefit of Europeans interested in trade and commerce prospects in Assam. In 1824, East India Company's Surveyor General Captain Valentine Blacker wrote to Lord Amherst about Assam:

> Its interesting situation between Hindustan and China, two names with which the civilized world has been long familiar, whilst it remains unknown, is a striking fact and leaves nothing to be wished, but the means and opportunity for exploring it. (Barua: 1970: ii)

But the comment seems to be slightly exaggerated; Assam was not an entirely unknown province for the colonial power in 1824. It was in fact associated with British trade since late eighteenth century.

The Company appointed an agent at Goalpara, then bordering Assam, on November 1, 1765 to participate in inland trade consisting mainly of salt, betel-nut and tobacco (Bhuyan: 1949:67). From that period, many Europeans came to Assam proper and a few of them prepared reports or accounts of Assam. Several of these accounts also documented about the language of the province.

John Peter Wade, who travelled to Assam as a medical practitioner with Captain Welsh in the last decade of eighteenth century in his *An Account of Assam*, written in the later part of the eighteenth century, mentioned that *buranjis* were written in two languages – *Ahom* and *Bakha* or *Bassa*, which was a dialect of Bengali. Francis B. Hamilton during his survey of Eastern India in the first decade of nineteenth century, collected materials partly from "several natives of Bengal, who, on different occasions visited Assam" and partly from natives of Assam, who were temporarily residing in Bengal after series of civil war. For Bucannon the main informant was a Bengali Brahmin, who was a family-member of the spiritual guide of the Ahom king. Being a Bengali himself with no knowledge of philology, he must had some confusion about Assamese and the Ahom language. Hamilton was convinced that

the 'Assamese' language was becoming extinct and it was being replaced by a dialect of Bengali (Hamilton: 1963:7). He also wrote that "a dialect of Bengali" was the common language of the Ahom court and it replaced the old 'Assamese' language prevalent until the time of Ahom king Rudrasimha (ibid). These were some of the earliest East India Company records where Assamese was conceptualized as a dialect of Bengali.

One of the most important centers of Indian linguistic practices and languages in the early nineteenth century was the Serampore Mission in Bengal. As a part of their evangelical mission, they devoted themselves to the study of different Indian vernaculars and translating the Bible and other religious tracts to these languages. They also produced philological materials in these languages that helped themselves as well as colonial officials and other missionaries to learn Indian languages which were immensely helpful in communicating with other Indians in their own languages. In 1813, the Baptist Missionary Society published *Dharma Pustak*, a translation of the New Testament of the *Bible* and the first Assamese printed book. In 1822, the mission published a language map of India, drawn and engraved by J. Walker, based on the

information collected by the Serampore missionaries (Figure 1). The map contains a list of the Indian languages into which the *Bible* was translated till then. The map covers the length and breadth of the Indian subcontinent including Nepal and Ceylon or Sri Lanka and documents the presence of forty-seven spoken languages and it includes the *Assam language*. The Serampore missionaries used two connotations for describing the language of the province – Assamese and Assam language. In 1819, a list of one hundred and twenty six languages and dialects in which translation, printing or distribution of Christian religious scriptures or portions of them, promoted by the British and Foreign Bible Society was published in the Classical Journal, a mouthpiece for missionary organizations.. In the third category of the list which enlisted the languages and dialects was published by the Serampore and its auxiliary societies by grants of the society the name Assamese was featured.[14] In 1825, the missionaries published a facsimile of a printed passage in different Eastern languages and Assamese was not included in it (Figure 2). Therefore, the fact that Assamese language was not accorded the status of a major Indian languages like Bengali or Oriya was evident by the missionaries' treatment of the language.

Figure 1

Map of India Exhibiting the extent to which its various languages were spoken. Prepared by the Serampore Missionaries, 1822



Source: http://www.wmcarey.edu/carey/bibles/translation.htm

Figure 2

No. 16. *Oct.* 1825.

Quarterly Papers,

FOR THE USE OF THE

WEEKLY AND MONTHLY CONTRIBUTORS

TO THE

Baptist Missionary Society.

FAC-SIMILE OF A PRINTED PASSAGE

IN THIRTEEN OF THE

EASTERN LANGUAGES.

TEXT. "The people which sat in darkness saw great light," &c.
Matt. iv. 16.

1 যে লোক অন্ধকারে বসিয়াছিল তাহারা মহা আলো

2 [illegible]

3 जो लोग अँधियारे में बैठे थे उन्हों ने बड़ी रोशनी देखी

4 [illegible]

5 [illegible]

6 [illegible]

7 [illegible]

8 [illegible]

9 [illegible]

10 [illegible]

11 [illegible]

12 遂虛于氣形未地造神原
之幽空蠻陰成地天創始

13 [illegible]

No. 1. The Bengalee.
— 2. The Orissa.
— 3. The Hindoosthanee.
— 4. The Sungskrit.
— 5. The Telinga.
— 6. The Kurnata.
No. 7. The Affghan.
— 8. The Burman.
— 9. The Tamul.
— 10. The Cingalese.
— 11. The Malay.
— 12. The Chinese.

In *Asiatic Journal and Monthly Register for British India and Its Dependencies*, there were several mentions about the language of Assam before the annexation by the Company. For example, the name of the 'Assam language' was featured repeatedly between 1816 and 1820. Here is an illustrative example from 1818:

> In the Pushtoo Testament the printing is advanced as far 1st of Peter; and in the Assam and Wutch, to the Roman; while in the Bruj Bhasa, although a delay has arisen in consequence of the distance of Brother Chamberlain's station, who was superintending the version, we are preparing to proceed with the printing as before.[15]

During the preparation for war with the Burmese in 1824, the Company prepared the text of a proclamation to the people of Assam. Three hundred lithographic impressions of the proclamation in Assamese were made as "the people in general being unable to read the printed character"[16] which implies that the Assamese script was different from the Bengali script, and was still more different from Bengali types till 1824. More importantly, the colonial authority was well aware of crucial difference between these two languages and hence they had prepared the text in Assamese.

The missionary and colonial knowledge of Assamese as a spoken language of Assam was clearly accessible to the East India Company authorities. As early as 1824, the Company had already acknowledged the difference between Assamese and Bengali as it has been mentioned above. Still it preferred to choose Bengali as the official language of Assam. It would have been unremarkable were it not for the existence of Act 29, which ensured that local vernaculars would be used in provincial administration in Company territories. It may be recalled that Act 29 was greatly motivated by political ideals that insisted on Indians being governed in and through a language they understood and spoke. The decision to place Bengali as the official language of Assam was clearly a counter-example to this policy. What then prompted the colonial power to choose a language other than Assamese in Assam? The Company did not give any justification for its language policy at that time. Only much later, a colonial officer tried to conjecture the factors that could place Bengali as the official language. In 1872, Captain M.O. Boyd, Assistant Commissioner of Mangaldai, wrote in a report to the Deputy Commissioner of Darrang about his view on the restoration of Assamese. In this report, he described the

possible factors that could determine the official language of the province:

> The selection of Bengali was, I conjecture, made with a view, *first*, to introducing a uniform court language throughout the province, on the ground that the Assamese dialects were so numerous and so distinct in character that documents written in the vernacular of one district would be difficult of comprehension in another; and *secondly*, to taking advantage of a language possessing a ready-made vocabulary of law terms, in which respect Assamese was undoubtedly deficient.[17]

The first point raised by Captain Boyd may have some truth as there was no standard Assamese at that time which would be acceptable to the speakers of all dialects of Assamese. However, the linguistic situation of Bengal was not very much different from Assam at the beginning of the colonial period. The second point did not have any ground as until 1837, Bengali was also not used in Bengal as the court language. Therefore, in 1837, there was no added advantage to Bengali as a court language.

There might be another reason that prompted the colonial power to introduce Bengali in Assam. The Company anticipated that the cultivation of Bengali would "enable the natives of Assam to

participate in the benefit of all the works which may in future be translated into Bengalee for the benefit of lower provinces"[18] In 1854, Jenkins and William Robinson, inspector of schools, echoed similar arguments while defending the retention of Bengali as the official language.

The displacement of Assamese has remained a major literary and political issue for Assamese literary historians and social scientists and there have been mainly two different opinions prevalent as the reason behind the displacement of Assamese as the official language of Assam. Most of the Assamese literary historians have inclined to believe that the Bengali clerks, recruited by the colonial regime were the main playmakers. They made the authority believe that Assamese was a mere dialect or corrupt version of Bengali and there was no basic difference between Assamese and Bengali (Bhuyan: 1990: 8). Another version, articulated by both social and literary historians, on the other hand, asserted that the colonial authority themselves chose Bengali for convenience in administrative matters (Barpujari: 1987; Barman & Choudhury: 1986). The colonial records and other contemporary sources have to be analyzed to know the colonial rational, which

decided the language policy of Assam. The language policy of other provinces may also be helpful because in theory every province had to enact the Act 29.

One of the important reason that the East Indian Company instituted Bengali as the official language of Assam was that it could get a set of trained administrative personnel. In the years immediately following annexation, the colonial authority employed Assamese ex-officials of the Ahom regime maintaining a policy of not antagonizing them. But most of them could not be fitted into the new bureaucratic and legal set up as they were not adapted to the western administrative system. Higher officials in the Company, thereafter, repeatedly argued for an immediate need for trained subordinates to staff the new provincial government in Assam. Most of the Indian staff coming to Assam was primarily from Bengal and this was not unique. When Jenkins joined his service in Assam in 1830s, he found that all the clerks with two or three exceptions were Bengalis.[19] In his 1854 correspondence with the Bengal superiors, he stated

> The Courts of then two existing Zillas, Gowalparah and Kamroop, (Lower Assam,) were also filled with Bengalis, who had mostly accompanied Mr.

> Scott from Rungpore; the Police Officers, as also the Native Judges in Gowalparah, were mostly Mahomedans of Burdwan or the North West Provinces, whilst all the Chief Revenue Officers and all the Tresurers were Bengalis of Rungpore and Mymensing, or Brahmins of Santipore, connected with the Gosains of the Kamikha Temple (sic) of Gowhatty (Long: 1855: 169).

They were well versed in Bengali, but knew no Assamese and after coming to Assam, they thought that Assamese was a dialect of Bengali. Similarly, the British officers who took up positions had some rudimentary knowledge of Assamese, but were more comfortable with Bengali as they had already learnt and passed a test of that language in their training days. By using Bengali in courts and revenue proceedings, the Company was, therefore, able to fill both administrative and clerical positions with experienced and trusted employees. Similar situation prevailed in the education sector too where Bengali teachers gradually substituted erstwhile Assamese Brahmin *pundits* from native schools as they were not complying to the company policy of imparting education to the lower classes of the society (Long: 1855: 173) .

For a number of reasons, the Company officials were convinced that Assamese was incapable of serving as an administrative

language. This attitude towards Assamese was based on misconceptions about Assamese linguistic and literary tradition. Hardly these officials had any intuition about the five hundred year long stable and established Assamese literary tradition. While most of the Company records continued to identify Assamese either as a spoken language or as a dialect of Bengali, it was only the Serampore missionaries which acknowledged Assamese as an independent language and found it importance to print and publish a book to prove this point. But this translation was not good enough for substantiating Assamese as a written language. The American Baptist Missionaries had to re-translate the Bible for this deficiency.

Early Company records identified Bengali or a 'corrupt version' of Bengali as the language of Assam. Ananadaram Dhekial Phukan, in his 1854 memorandum to A.J.M. Mill, also mentioned about this "erroneous impression that the Assamese and Bengali language are identically one and the same" (Neog: 1977: 152). Moreover, Bengali was seen as the language of Assamese elites, a class that the early colonial power fostered as potential colonial officials as well as intermediaries with the royalties and the subjects as large. Most of the early Assamese company officials, such as Haliram Dhekial

Phukan, Maniram Dewan or Jajnaram Khargharia Phukan were from this elite class. These elites did not influence the Company to choose Assamese as the official language. On the contrary, some of the elites who had contacts with outer world and new ideas, regularly subscribed to Bengali newspapers and contributed to these papers which was duly acknowledged by the papers.[20] Contemporary Assamese elites used Bengali as the medium of their correspondence too. In 29th August 1831, much before the Act XXIX, Joduram Deka Barua, the compiler of the first Bengali-Assamese Dictionary, wrote a letter in Bengali for a correction in Haliram's *Buranji.* (Sharma: 1964: 105) With the exception of Harakanta Sadaramin Barua, most of them used Bengali as the medium of their writing. They preferred Bengali as Assamese had not been developed as a modern vernacular till then. There was not a single murmur of protest from the Assamese intelligentsia against the displacement of Assamese until 1854, when Ananadaram petitioned to change the language of courts and schools to Assamese.

The role of Bengali clerks in this episode, as narrated by the later Assamese intelligentsia and literary historians, seem to be little

exaggerated. This exaggeration owes largely to the ambience of competing aspirations between Assamese and Bengali middle classes in the late nineteenth century. The influence of Bengali staffs in determining the colonial language policy of Assam is hardly substantiated by any documentary proof. None of the colonial officials or contemporary Assamese intellectuals mentioned anything about the role of Bengali clerks. Contrary to this, Jenkins owned the responsibility of choosing Bengali over Assamese as the official language of Assam (Barman and Choudhuri: 1986: 21). Secondly, as Bengal had progressed in Western education and had already proved to be competent and faithful subjects of the colonial state, Bengali clerks were employed in large scales in other provinces such as Orissa, Bihar and Punjab. But Bengali was not installed as the official language those areas.[21] . Actually it was a much later phenomenon when the expansionist moves by the Bengali resident communities began in Assam as well as in Bihar and Orissa[22]. This tendency was visible when the debate about the restoration of Assamese language was going on in the second half of the nineteenth century. At that point, several Bengali civil servants expressed their opinions against the restoration on the ground that Assamese was a dialect of Bengali like other eastern and northern

dialects of the language. Moreover, some colonial officials prepared their reports against the restoration with the help and guidance of Bengali subordinates. For example, C.A. Martin, the officiating School Inspector of Assam, relied on the view of his Bengali translator cum Head Assistant to such a large extent that he tried to ignore the opinion of Ramesh Chandra Dutta, an ICS officer and a reputed Bengali scholar of his time, about the independent status of the Assamese language. [23]

It seems that the decision to install Bengali as the official language of Assam by the colonial government can be explained by combining the inter-related factors. Colonial state's desire to get a cadre of experienced and trained administrative personnel, the colonial attitude towards Assamese language, non-existence of a native intelligentsia who could influence the colonial state for installation of Assamese or could oppose the Company's decision, and contemporary aristocracy's preference to Bengali are some of the factors that seem to play an important role in taking this decision. Some of these factors were to be found at the time of determining the colonial language policies of other provinces also. For example, in Bengal in 1837, the company administrators

showed concern over the suitability of Bengali as an administrative language and the availability of qualified personnel. Similar arguments were used against introduction of Bengali as the administrative language in Punjab too. In 1849, shortly after the annexation of Punjab by the Company, same issues were raised by the colonial officers against using Punjabi, the vernacular language, used by the majority of the population of the province. Interestingly, these arguments failed in Bengal, while in Punjab, as in Assam, same arguments prevailed and Persian as well as Urdu was instituted as the official language of the province (Mir: 2006: 317). An examination of different local application of the colonial language policy in nineteenth century colonial India suggests about the contradiction between the imperial policies with provincial authority and the limit of imperial policies in determination of local policies.

2.4 Impact of language policy

The colonial language policy of Assam affected the transition process of Assamese language to a modern vernacular. It also affected the emerging Assamese middle-classes' attitude towards Assamese in the nineteenth century colonial Assam. Moreover, this

policy was the beginning of tensions between the Assamese speech community and the Bengali speech community of Assam and of Bengal.

The predicament of the Assamese language had started in pre-colonial time itself as in that period the rich Assamese literary tradition had been disrupted by political unrest and civil war. In the last fifty years of the Ahom regime, the state support for high literary practices had almost disappeared. It could have been recuperated if Assamese had been declared as the official language and had it got the state patronage like other vernaculars such as Bengali or Tamil had got while shaping as a modern vernacular. The pre-colonial Assamese did not have a standard form as different forms of Assamese were used for different literary genres. But this was applicable to other Indian vernaculars too. Unlike the Bengali tradition, the Assamese language had a long pre-colonial tradition of prose writing. Independent Assamese writers like Bhattadev (c. 1480 saka -1560) Raghunath Mahanta (18th century) along with historical chronicles (*buranji*) or hagiographies (carit puthies) had already gave birth and shaped an Assamese prose style. Engagement in prose tradition was crucially missing from the pre-

colonial Bengali literary tradition (Sen: 1965). But with exposure to western literary tradition and practices, and Western ideas through colonial education for half a century, Bengali was rapidly evolving as a medium of modern prose when Assam was yet to be a part of the Company government.

The displacement of Assamese language from schools of Assam, however, affected the prospect of mass education of the Indian subjects as desired by the Company government. After much deliberation and debates on the best medium for instruction between the Anglisists and the Orientalists, it had been finally decided that mass education would be conducted in vernacular languages. The improvement of vernacular literature was one of the briefs of the Education Committee, an all-India body established in 1854, which was later renamed as the Education Department. In the first Annual Report, the Committee admitted the "almost total absence of a Vernacular literature" and also warned about "the consequent impossibility of obtaining a tolerable education from that source alone" (Mir: 2006:420). Therefore, the Committee announced, "We conceive the formation of a Vernacular literature to be the ultimate object to which all our efforts must be directed" (ibid). Hence all the

Indian vernaculars which were declared as official languages of different provinces had got official patronage for the formation and betterment of their literature. But Assamese literature was deprived any such patronage from the colonial authority till 1873 when Assamese was restored. Till then the formation of modern Assamese literature was dependent solely on individual effort or missionary patronage and it seriously hampered the modernization of Assamese language and literature.

The displacement of Assamese as the official language further damaged the prospect of immediate modernization and stabilization of the language as it was not deemed as a 'language proper' by the colonial government as well as the Assamese speech community. Though Assamese was the medium of instruction in the missionary schools, these were attended by a small number of students. Most of the students were enrolled in government schools and their medium either English or Bengali. Those educated young Assamese young men did not consider Assamese worthy of a medium of literature, letters or even formal dialogues. Lakshminath Bezbaroa and Padmanath Gohainborooah, Assamese littérateurs of late

nineteenth and early twentieth century, mentioned about this phenomenon in their autobiographies.

2.5 Response to the colonial language policy

The missionary schools in Assam were founded by the American Baptist missionaries, who came to Assam just after the implementation of the colonial language policy of Assam. After finally settling in Assam for their evangelical mission, it decided to set up some schools. As for the medium of instruction in these schools, they were in a dilemma. With critical training in philology, they realized that Assamese was the spoken language of the province whereas Bengali was the official medium of instruction. The mission deliberated extensively on the colonial language policy as it could affect their evangelical mission of propagating Christianity in the local vernacular. In 1838, Rev. Brown wrote in a letter:

> This project [the introduction of Bengali in schools] has been for some time in contemplation, and now that government has set about the work thus vigorously, there can be little doubt that they will ultimately succeed in effecting the change. This renders it a serious question with us, how

far we ought to cultivate the Assamese, or teach it in schools.(Downs: 1977-78)

Ultimately the mission took the decision in favour of Assamese and started printing and publishing religious tracts and teaching materials. The American Baptist Mission had already decided upon their own language policy that aimed to preach the natives in their mother-tongue as an alien language could not serve that purpose. Hence, they had to go against the colonial language policy though they were brought and facilitated by that colonial power itself.

2.6 The language debate

2.6.1 The language debate in nineteenth century Assam was an interesting admixture of linguistic features with different but sometime overlapping motives such as administrative feasibility, expansionist (linguistic and religious) intention or national identity. Members from the colonial administration – both of British and Bengali origins, missionaries, and Assamese intellectuals participated in the debate on Assamese language question in different platforms like official correspondence, books and journals. But participations of this prolonged debate cannot be classified into

any distinct categories. Members from the same group could be seen in either side of the participants. For example, colonial officers were divided into two distinct categories of for Assamese or against Assamese. Likewise, there was difference of opinion amongst the missionaries. The difference of opinion can be visible in case of the Bengali participants also. The Bengali civil servants from Assam were in favour of Bengali. But several civilians from Bengal as well as other Bengali residents from Assam were noticed in the opposite camp. And interestingly, there was a divide in the Assamese camp too.

The discussion on Assamese language had occupied a sizable part of the colonial administration as well as missionary activities of the Baptist Missionaries. The linguistic analysis of Assamese, its relation to Bengali, and the suitability of the language in administrative and legal works are some features that were raised and discussed in different debates on the Assamese language that were held during the period of linguistic instability in Assam.

As mentioned earlier, a serious discussion on Assamese language had been started by the missionaries in the third decade of

the nineteenth century. In 1837, just after finally selecting Assam as their centre for evangelical mission, the American Baptist missionaries tried to establish the genealogical origin of the Assamese language. Initially, they thought that the language came from the Indo-Chinese language family, which included all the languages of India and China. They also noticed that Bengali and Assamese did "possess close affinity to each other" except "slight variation in pronunciation".[24] And they were in a fix in deciding about the language of the mission as the colonial authority declared Bengali as the official language. But after exhaustive deliberations, the mission decided to use Assamese as their major medium of instruction as well as their preaching in Assam. They produced several Assamese printing matters including elementary text books, grammar, and a monthly journal in the next ten years. After that they tried to mobilize the public opinion to pressurize the authority for the institution of Assamese in Assam. In fact barring Anandaram as the sole crusader on behalf of Assamese language, the missionaries' was the most prominent voice in the first phase of the language debate.

After seventeen years of displacement, for the first time, Anandaram Dhekiyal Phukan or Baboo Anunadaram Dekeal Phookun, as he spelled his name, raised the issue of difference between the vernacular of the province and the official language. In a memorandum presented to A.J.M. Mills, the *sadar* judge, who came to Assam to get a first hand knowledge about its condition, Phukan drew attention of the colonial government to the difficulties faced by the common people as the language of the court was foreign to them:

> Under the Provisions of Act XXIX of 1837, the Vernacular language of a district was directed to be used in the courts. We find, however, with regret, that not withstanding the provisions of this wholesome law, a foreign language, viz., the Bengallee, has been introduced into the courts of Assam. It is only to the officers and other persons connected with the courts that Bengallee is generally intelligible. The mass of the population and private gentlemen possess no knowledge of the language. The Native judges are less familiar with the Bengallee than with their own tongue, and the European judges have always been found to understand the Vernacular Assamese with greater facility than the Bengallee; and they often speak the former with a degree of fluency much to be commended. Even evidence which under Section VI. Regulation IV. of 1793, ought to be taken in the language intelligible to the witness is

> recorded in Bengallee, and the mischiefs arising from this practice have been already alluded to on the head of evidence (Neog: 1977: 118).

He also insisted that the similarity of Bengali with Assamese was not more than the former's similarity with Oriya; and if Oriya could be the court language of Orissa, then Assamese should also be used in lower courts of the province (Neog: 1977:118). In his other publication of the year, where Ananadaram used the pseudo name 'A Native', he advocated for the use of Assamese as a medium of instruction in the schools of Assam. However, he did not want to eradicate Bengali altogether from the schools of the province as it has been believed by the Assamese literary historians of later years. He wanted Assamese students to begin their education in Assamese and then use Bengali as the medium in higher classes in the same way as their counterparts in Europe start their education in their vernacular and then graduate to Latin (Neog: 1977: 150). Anandaram's proposal was grounded in political ideals and philology. He lamented that no difference was perceived between the languages of Bengal and Assam and the 'mistake' of introducing Bengali in Assam was committed. The Assamese community, therefore, should be permitted to express their belief that "the error in question, has been, and is still likely to be, the principal cause of

retarding the intellectual improvement of the people of Assam" (Neog: 1977: 121). He also wanted to assert the community's 'right to use our native language, both in the education of the people and in the dispension of justice' (Neog: 1977: 124). His philological arguments about the difference between Assamese and Bengali were based on three grounds. His acquaintance with both of the languages made him believe that they were separate languages. Secondly, the vocabulary of Assamese and Bengali are not identical. It consists of some common loan words from Sanskrit, some similar words and some separate words. Thirdly, these two languages have their differences in written or 'refined' as well as at colloquial level. Ananadaram compares several specimens from Assamese and Bengali languages to establish a distinct identity of the Assamese language. According to him, the presence of common loan words from Sanskrit cannot deny a language its identity:

> We may here remark, that almost all the dialects, spoken in different parts of India, may be said to have their origin in Sanskrit and contain a vast proportion of Sanskrit words, introduced either in an original, or a modified form; and there is not a Sanskrit word which cannot be, with propriety, used in any of the various dialects of the Hindoos. It necessarily follows, that if the writer or speaker in any of these dialects

> chooses to borrow largely from Sanskrit, he would be nearly understood by all Hindoos of education throughout India (Neog: 1977: 143).

Anandaram also thought that the introduction of Bengali as the medium of instruction in the schools of Assam had hampered educational progress of Assamese students. During an inspection of schools in different parts of the province, he noticed that even after studying Bengali for four or five years, Assamese students could not translate an Assamese sentence into Bengali properly. Therefore it was beyond their reach to "acquire knowledge by means of books written in that language"(ibid:143). Anandaram also pointed to the discrepancy of the colonial language policy of Assam:

> Act XXIX of 1837 gave full authority to the government to adopt the Vernacular of the country in lieu of any foreign language; and the Government in the exercise of this authority wisely abolished the Persian from the courts of Bengal and Hindustan and substituted the Bengali and Hindustani languages respectively in the provinces. In regard to Assam, however, a serious error appears to have been committed; and the law of 1837, instead of giving the Assamese their own language, has produced a contrary effect, and made the language of Bengal supersede that of Assam(Neog: 1977: 152).

Anandaram insisted that Assamese language was not a vulgar and 'uncouth' language as conceptualized by the authority and it is sufficiently capable to express all the sentiments which the "present

improved state of science and literature" requires. He also prepares a catalogue of Assamese manuscripts and published books to refute the allegation of not having a literary tradition. He regrets that the colonial government's "misdirected" effort to improve and enlighten the Assamese people proves "abortive" (Neog:1977: 169).

This debate was extensively covered by print media, both domestic and overseas. The missionary journal *Orunodoi* acted as the first platform for building public opinion for the rehabilitation of Assamese language. Moreover, the *Baptist Mission Magazine*, the mouthpiece of American Baptist Society which was published from Boston in United States of America, closely monitored the debate. While announcing the printing and publishing of Anandaram's book on Assamese language by the missionaries, the magazine also commented upon the ongoing language debate:

> The question in agitation is whether the native population may use and cultivate the language wherein they were born, or shall substitute the language of another province and people. The principal arguments alleged in favor of the Bengali, the language propose to be substituted, appear to be founded mainly on the supposed essential identity of the Assamese with the Bengali, the differences being regarded as "differences of form," belonging to the grammar and not the vocabulary, -

on the superior refinement of Bengali as contrasted with the so-called "crude, and vulgar and slovenly" Assamese, - and on the general expediency of availing "of the books that have been prepared and may yet be published for the thirty million of Bengal – in preference to creating a distinct literature. For a comparatively small section of the people, merely for the sake of perpetuating what at best, is but a dialectical difference."[25]

2.6.3. Colonial response to the language question throughout the thirty six years of displacement of Assamese is also an interesting episode of the linguistic and philological study of the Assamese language in the nineteenth century. The colonial government's response to Anandaram's petition can be found in the report presented by A.J.M. Mills. Appointed by the authority to assess the administrative scenario of the Assam province in 1850s, Mills submitted his report in 1854. He had received several memorandums from colonial officials, missionaries and colonial officers on different aspects of Assam. Two of these memorials, one from Ananadaram and one from Missionary Danforth covered the issue of displacement of Assamese from courts and schools of Assam. Both the petitioners prayed for the installation of the Assamese vernacular in courts and lower classes of schools. Mills

was sympathetic to the cause of Assamese but was also aware of the colonial reality that it could cause much inconvenience to the authority in replacing Bengali as the whole set up had to be changed to accommodate Assamese in courts and schools. But he acknowledged that Assamese was a different language from Bengali and it had a literary repertoire. He desired to install Assamese in the lower section of schools though he did not press for the replacement of Bengali from the courts in Assam:

> The people complain and in my opinion with much reason, of the substitution of Bengallee for the vernacular Assamese. Bengallee is the language of the Courts, not of their popular books and Shasters, and there is a strong prejudice to its general use. It is because instruction is imparted to the youths in a foreign tongue that they look only to Government for employ. Assamese is described by Mr. Brown, the best scholar in the province, as a beautiful, simple language, differing in more respects from than agreeing with the Bengallee, and I think we made a great mistake in directing that all business should be transacted in Bengallee, and that the Assamese must acquire it. It is too late now to retrace our steps, but I strongly recommend Anundoram Phookan's proposition to the favourable consideration of the Council of Education, viz., the substitution of the Vernacular language in lieu of Bengallee, the publication of a series of popular works in the Assamese language, and the completion of the course of Vernacular education in Bengallee. I feel

> persuaded that a youth will, under this system of tuition, learn more in two than he now acquire in four years. An English youth, is not taught Latin until he is well grounded in English, and in the same manner, an Assamese should not be taught a foreign language until he knows his own (Mills: 1984: 28).

An analysis of these observations by Mills points to three aspects: a) Assamese is a separate language and the government made a great mistake by not acknowledging it; b) the decision on official language could not be retraced at the moment, and c) the Assamese students should start their education in Assamese and then complete their schooling in Bengali.

2.6.4. The first debate on Assamese was held between the colonial authority and the missionaries in 1854. The missionaries believed that Robinson had influenced the Council of Education against the introduction of Assamese despite the favourable recommendation from Mills. They decided that "the time has arrived when the subject should be openly discussed" (Long: 1855: 169). Hence, six missionaries, stationed at different places of Assam strongly responded to Robinson's arguments where he repeated his earlier views about the similarity of Assamese and Bengali, disguised only in the difference of forms between colloquial Assamese and refined

Bengali of the books. Nathan Brown, the author of the second grammar on Assamese after Robinson, refuted the claim of similarity between Assamese and Bengali on the ground that these two languages are mutually unintelligible. According to him, their pronunciation as well as orthography was not similar. Brown asserted that the modes of pronunciation were uniform even in a large territory. However, from this large territory, he most interestingly excluded the *Dhekeris,* the caste-Hindus of Kamrup as well as the Kacharis and other tribes to whom Assamese was not the vernacular. However, William Ward, who was stationed at Guwahati did not share his view and asserted that all the residents of Assam could easily understand the 'vernacular of Upper Assam'. The judgments by Brown and Ward about the speech community and local varieties of the Assamese language seem to be guided by the attitude of the local people of their respective postings. Robinson, however, retorted that the exclusion of the people from lower Assam or western Assam and other tribes from the speech community of Assamese would reduce the number of speakers of the vernacular to a comparatively small section of the community (Long: 1855: 167). Brown's urge for restoration of Assamese was shared also by other missionaries who participated in this debate.

One thing is clear that the missionaries were facing problem in their evangelical project as the language of their books and the official language was different (Long: 1855: 151).

The colonial response to the debate was typically grounded more on administrative feasibility than linguistic accuracy. Though Robinson asserted in his different writings about the oneness of Assamese and Bengali, he was more concerned about the difficulties that would be faced by the administration in the case of the replacement of the existing official language. He admitted the fact that some dialectical differences were there between Assamese and Bengali. But at the same time, such differences might be noticed in Assamese orthography itself which could be implied by the different orthography followed by Anandaram and the missionaries. According to him, except Anandaram, there was no opposition to the use of Bengali in the government schools. He stressed the "want of school books" in Assamese vernacular as a reason for not replacing Bengali in schools. In the case of Assamese declared as the medium of instruction, "it will be necessary to prepare a series of School books in it, and that could not be done without considerable additional expense" (Long: 1855: 185). An

additional expense would be required for translating Bengali books and other governmental documents such as official gazettes, circulars into Assamese and then publishing them. Jenkins was more forthright when he stated that the introduction of Assamese in schools would be ruinous as it would stop the process of "gradual amalgamation of the people of Assam with our subjects in Bengal" (Long: 1855: 173). Moreover, the uniformity of administration in Assam and Bengal proper could not be retained anymore. He also stated that an Assamese having instruction in Bengali could still read an Assamese book. But having studied in Assamese medium, he would be isolated as well as deprived from studying the large and advanced repertoire of Bengali books, published by numerous presses of the province.

2.6.5. This debate then entered the public sphere of Assamese society. Encouraged by the missionaries as well as by the newborn sense of linguistic identity, several Assamese young intellectuals wrote extensively on this issue and kept the issue in constant focus. Several essays and letters were published in *Orunodoi,* where the young Assamese writers identified the development of the province with the development of the mother tongue. One short essay,

published in 1855, also emphasized the practical gains that could be gained by the study of local vernacular. The author mentioned about the official circular by which the knowledge of native vernacular, i.e. Assamese was essential for any appointment exceeding the salary of six rupees (Saikia: 2002: 133). Gunabhiram Barua writing under the pen name of 'an Assamese person' published essays on the rich literary heritage of the Assamese language and its difference with the Bengali language (Neog: 1983: 1095).

2.6.6 The constant pressure from the missionaries and Assamese intellectuals made the colonial authority to reconsider its earlier decision. It, therefore, asked for opinions from different quarters of the administration and representations from the people of Assam about their views in this issue. The correspondences can be divided into official and civilian categories. Altogether opinions of fourteen colonial officials including two Bengali natives were consulted before taking any decision on the issue. As neither Bengali nor Assamese were spoken in the hill districts, no opinion from those districts was consulted. Five officers were in favour of Assamese whereas eight were against it. The opinion of Babu Chandranath Nandy, translator

to C.A Martin and also a judicial head- assistant, was not taken into account. It is very interesting to note that the officers who advocated for Assamese had never served in Bengal. On the other hand, the officials who were against the installation of Assamese either had served in Bengal or they were natives from Bengal. [26] Martin, the officiating Inspector of Schools of Assam circle prepared a list of such officers mentioning about their stint in Bengal proper or lack of it. Another interesting point not mentioned by Martin was that the officers in favour of Assamese were vehemently against the use of Bengali in courts and schools. One thing is clear from their reports that a major portion of *amlahs* were from Assamese community in 1872[27]. However, their views about the existing court language were not identical. The Deputy Commissioner of Nagaon reported that the court language was Assamese in three fourth of the cases when the parties concerned were Assamese.[28] An Assistant Commissioner from Sivasagar, on the other hand reported that the so-called Court Bengali was nothing but a "mongrel language" and a spurious compound of Bengali, Assamese and Urdu.[29] He also stressed the need of the introduction of Assamese in schools too as dictionary and books were now available in the language.

Martin forwarded these correspondences to the provincial authority with his own report. He repeatedly denied acknowledging Assamese as a separate language on the basis of the vocabulary shared by Assamese and Bengali. In 1873, Martin, while analyzing the pros and cons of introducing Assamese in the schools of Assam, made an interesting point about the opinion of the officers on Assamese language:

> I observe that almost all of the gentlemen whose opinion as expressed in those reports is that Assamese is but a dialect of Bengali have served for several years in Bengal proper, and have known the Bengali language as *spoken* before coming to Assam: while those who hold that the province has a distinct language of its own are chiefly the missionaries who have come direct from America to Assam and military officers, who before entering the commission had a knowledge of Hindustani but not of Bengali, or if they had any knowledge of Bengali, it was the Bengali of books and not the language of peasants.[30]

In his correspondence, Martin quoted from Porter's *Educational Report for 1867-68* where Porter made two points against the status of Assamese as a distinct language. According to him, the language spoken in Sibsagar differed from Kamrup and North Darrang. The Kacharis and the 'Mikir's had their own dialects; and the hill tribes could easily learn Bengali in place of Assamese. Secondly, the

missionaries are continuing their process "to make Assamese as different as possible from Bengali, by destroying the whole science of the Language, and making it impossible to trace the root of a word."[31] Porter defined the Assamese language used by the missionaries as Missionary Assamese and he lamented the fact that an Assamese boy acquainted with this language had to unlearn almost all that he learnt when he would turn to Bengali. After 'carefully' reading all the correspondences on the restoration of Assamese in Assam, Martin was also "inclined to believe that the language of Assam does not differ from that of Rangpur more than does the language of Sylhet or Chittagong differ from that of Calcutta or Nuddea".[32]

2.6.7 The Assamese civilian views were generally in favour of Assamese. A memorendum from Nagaon and signed by Assamese and Bengali civilians and missionaries reiterated their demand for introducing Assamese as the official language of the province. It is interesting that at least several Bengali gentlemen also signed this memorendum. However, colonial government's initiatives on restoration of Assamese took forward the question of the 'real Assamese' or the actual language of Assam to the forefront. Due to

long cultural and political differences between the people of upper Assam and lower Assam, their spoken languages also had a few differences in phonological, morphological and syntactical levels. In pre-colonial Assam, Assamese and Kamrupi, the dialect of Lower Assam might be considered as separate languages. It may be noted that Ruchinath Kamrupi compiled the first vocabulary of Assamese which had differentiated between Assamese, Kamrupi and Sanskrit (Figure 3). The missionaries as well as Anandaram and Hemchandra Barua groomed modern Assamese vernacular in the model of the spoken language of Sivasagar, i.e., of Upper Assam which was not acceptable to the speech community of Lower Assam. Another memorandum, signed by 1226 people from Lower Assam, drafted after Assamese was declared as the language of the court, was sent to the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal. It claimed that "the dialect current in Upper Assam", spoken only in Dibrugarh and Sibsagar districts was "improperly designated as the Assamese language".[33] The decision to use the local vernacular in courts would not be possible with the introduction of Assamese as it was "comprehended by the uneducated class of Lower Assam with almost the same amount of difficulty as the Bengali".[34] They felt that the missionaries helped the project of the people from Upper Assam

to force their 'patois' on the people of whole Assam. The petitioners were in favour of Bengali as the official language of the province because it was either "very closely akin to our language" or identical with Bengali as confirmed by "many high linguistic authority". This debate on the 'real Assamese' continued through the third decade of the twentieth century which will be discussed in a latter chapter. But much before the people from the Lower Assam demanded that their dialect was the real Assamese as it was the literary language of pre-colonial Assam, the division between the dialects of upper Assam and lower Assam was clearly visible from the circulation pattern of the *Orunodoi*. In a statement submitted to Captain Holroyd, Magistrate of Sivasagar, and prepared by Miles Bronson, who was in charge of the mission press at that time, the circulation of the journal from its commencement to the end of 1852 was recorded. This record demonstrates a more or less stable readership in Upper Assam whereas the Lower Assam witnessed a sharp decline. In 1846, when the journal was first published, people from lower Assam town like Mangaldoi and Goalpara subscribed the journal as much as their counterparts in Upper Assam. But after three years of gradual declinement, the figures came down to zero in Mangaldoi and one in Goalpara. There was not any subscriber in any other

lower Assam town. The circulation pattern of the journal seems to have related with the difference of the spoken languages of the community. As the journal was published in the Upper Assam dialect, readers from Lower Assam seem to be uncomfortable to follow the language as the following table clearly indicates.

Table 2.1
Circulation of the *Orunodoi* 1846- 1852

Station	1846	1847	1848	1849	1850	1851	1852
Sibsagar	113	113	105	105	123	158	101
Nazira	1	1	0	10	10	10	11
Lakhimpur	28	28	5	5	8	8	7
Dibrugarh	36	48	26	24	43	43	42
Jaipur	23	18	8	0	0	0	1
Saikhoa	0	10	10	10	10	10	10
Golaghat	15	15	12	12	11	11	10
Tezpur	78	75	70	83	64	66	65
Mangaldoi	52	42	11	0	0	0	0
Nagaon	90	50	62	62	65	72	86
Guwahati	126	125	226	121	136	160	167
Goalpara	6	6	6	0	0	0	1
Jorhat	0	0	0	0	0	0	7
Total	568	531	428	390	450	538	512

(Prepared from Long: 1855, p. 108)

The colonial authority finally declared Assamese as the official language and the medium of instruction in schools of Assam via Government of Bengal resolution No. 1537 on 19 April in 1873.

2.7 Conclusion

2.7.1 An examination of the colonial language policy of Assam makes one thing clear that there was a difference in the colonial language policy at imperial and provincial levels of administration. Whereas the colonial authority at the highest level propagated a policy of just rule with the help of local vernacular, its implication depended on the provincial administration only. There was a pattern in the way the colonial authority responded to the linguistic questions of a province. Generally, the responses of the colonial officers were negative, when they were directed to give their opinions about the introduction of the native vernacular as the official language of the province where they were posted. Their argument against the introduction of the vernacular was almost similar when they argued that the particular vernacular in question was 'vulgar', 'uncouth' and 'not suitable for administrative works'.

Figure 3

Ruchinath Kamrupi's Sanskrit-Asami-Kamrupi Vocabulary
(Source: British Library, Assamese Manuscripts)

শ্রীশ্রীদুর্গা
সহায়

১

সংস্কৃত	আসামীভাষা	কামরূপীভাষা
ঈশ্বরঃ	গোঁসাঞি	গোসাঞি
ঈশ্বরতা	০	০
স্রষ্টা	সর্জ্জনকর্ত্তা	সর্জ্জনকর্ত্তা
বিশ্বম্ভর:	ঐ	ঐ
সর্ব্বশক্তিমান্	এটাইসমর্থ	ইকনসমর্থ
অন্তর্যামী	অন্তর্যামী	অন্তর্যামী
নিত্যতা	অখয়অব্যয়	অখয়অব্যয়
গণ:	গণ	গণ
জীবঃ	জীউ	জীউ
প্রেত:	প্রেত	প্রেত
অধম	কঁপাল	কঁপাল
দৈত্য:	দোত	দোত
সৃষ্টি:	সৃষ্টি	সৃষ্টি
উৎপাদিতং	উৎপন্ন	উৎপন্ন
জগত	জগত	জগত

These were the very words used by the officers in contexts of different vernaculars such as Assamese, Punjabi, Oriya and even Bengali. The colonial government reacted in the same manner in different provinces on linguistic matters which is a pointer of their pre-mediated pattern of colonial language policy. The Punjab provincial government reacted in the same manner as their counterpart in Assam did when the issue of native vernacular and the official language was raised.

Like Anandaram Dhekial Phukan's memorandum to A.J.M. Mills, a British colonial officer stationed in the Punjab province, petitioned to the Punjab government to change the official language of the province to Punjabi and got the same response from the authority concerned. This petition was presented in 1862 by Judicial Commissioner R.N. Crust and he argued that the Punjab's language policy was flawed because it insisted "on the court language being different from the language in ordinary use in the district" (Mir: 2006: 416). As an amateur philologist who had *A Sketch of the Modern Languages of the East Indies and Linguistic and Oriental Essays* to his credit, he requested the Punjab government to change the official language. (ibid). On receiving the petition, the authority asked

District Commissioners in Punjab's central districts for their opinions. The overwhelming response was that Punjabi should not be introduced as the court language even after conceding that Punjabi was the only language in general use in the districts. The government ultimately rejected Cust's proposal because "it is unnecessary to alter the present court language" (ibid: 417) and retained Urdu as the official language of the province until 1947. However, the Punjab government, in a rejoinder, conceded that Punjabi was the language of the districts and it wished that the colonial officials "should take pain to familiarize themselves with the dialects of the districts in which they are placed" (ibid: 417). Colonial language policy of Punjab thus took a two language policy- one official and one unofficial language. Urdu was retained as the official language of the province. Court and administration records were documented in that language. On the other hand, Punjabi also played an unofficial and important role in administration as a lingua franca or colloquial language.

In 1850s, thus, the linguistic scenario in the provinces of Assam and Punjab were almost similar. In both the provinces, a language other than the native vernacular was instituted by the colonial

authority as the official language. The authorities were petitioned by colonial officers to restore the original vernacular as the official language. In both provinces the higher authority acknowledged the fact that the official language and the language used by the common people of the province were not the same language. But at the same time, they insisted that their early decision was not retraceable. However, the native vernacular should begin to get some importance and from mid-1850s, both Assamese and Punjabi had been used as unofficial language of communication in Assam and Punjab respectively. But the similarity ends here. Whereas Urdu dominated the printed discourse of Punjab's public sphere (ibid: 418), Bengali never got such importance in Assam. Assamese was the overwhelming choice of vernacular language for printed discourse of Assamese intellectuals as well as the American Baptist Missionaries during the displacement of Assamese as the official language. Moreover, Assamese was restored as the official language in 1873, but Urdu remained as the official language of Punjab until 1947.

2.7.2 But the case of W. Robinson was quite extra-ordinary. Earlier a British Baptist missionary and later a colonial officer, Robinson

wrote several books and articles on Assam. In fact he wrote the first grammar on the Assamese language[35]. It is quite interesting to note how his notion about the Assamese language was evolved through the years. It is also a marker to the impact of colonial language policy on colonial officers. After serving as a preacher at Guwahati Mission, he joined the colonial administration as the Head-master of newly found Government Seminary, Gowhati. In 1839, his *A Grammar of the Assamese Language* was published from the Serampore Press. In his dedication of the book to the General Committee of Public Instruction of the Presidency of Fort William in Bengal, Robinson acknowledged the Assamese language as 'the language of a province' and the aim of book was to "facilitate an acquaintance" with it (Robinson: 1839: 1). But two years later in his second book, *A Descriptive Account of Assam*, published in 1841, Robinson changed his mind and acknowledged Assamese as a 'dialect' and found a lot of similarity with Bengali:

> As the Ahoms were once the rulers of Assam, it is somewhat surprising that more traces of their language are not to be found in the present dialect of the Assamese, which, with the exception of a very few words of Tai origin, seems to have been originally derived from Sungskrit, and in most cases possesses a close affinity to the Bengali. A greater portion of the words in common use seem identical, and are distinguished only

by a slight difference in pronunciation...The grammatical peculiarities of the two languages are considerably unlike, though there is scarcely any difference in their syntactical construction (Robinson: 1975: 253).

In 1849, Robinson published "Notes on the Languages spoken by the various tribes inhabiting the valley of Asam and its mountain confines" in the *Journal of the Asiatic Society Bengal.* In this work, he defined 'Asamese' or Assamese as the 'language spoken by the entire population of the valley, and in most cases, is the only medium of intercourse between them and the people of the hills'(Robinson: 1849:184). He mentioned about the close affinity of the language to 'its parent' Sanskrit; but he had some reservations about the status of Assamese and whether it was a language or a dialect of Bengali:

It is highly probable, however that a careful investigation will conduce to the support of the later supposition; for there does not seem to be a greater diversity between what are usually considered the *provincialisms,* spoken in the remoter parts of Bengal, - in Chittagong and Silhet for instance, - and unadulterated Bengali of Nuddeah (where the language is said to be spoken in its purity), than between any of these and the dialect of Asam. (ibid:185).

After comparing the vocabulary, different grammatical categories and syntax and compositions, Robinson drew the conclusion that Assamese was a corrupt version of Bengali.

In 1854, after Mills submitted his report, the authority asked for a report about this matter from the concerned officials stationed in Assam. It may be noted here that Robinson, as the Inspector of Schools of Assam, naturally opposed the idea of restoration of Assamese as the official language of Assam. He was, hence, held responsible for the delay of the introduction of Assamese as the official language of the province by the missionaries as well as later nineteenth century Assamese intellectuals.

End Notes

[1] Court of Directors, letter to Governor General in Council at Fort William in Bengal, 27 January,1802, British Library (hereafter BL) , Asia and Africa Collection, F/4/300

[2] *Ibid*

[3] Extract Public Letter from Fort St. George to the Court of Directors, 8 September, 1805, BL, Asia and Africa Collection, F/4/300

[4] *Ibid*

[5] Extract Public Letter from Fort St. George, 23 October, 1805, BL, Asia and Africa Collection, F/4/357.

[6] Extract Public Letter from Fort St. George, 10 January,1812, BL, Asia and Africa Collection, F/4/357.

[7] Board of Control, letter to Judicial Department (No. 1 of 1835), 26 June, 1835, BL, Asia and Africa Collection, E/4/744.

[8] 'Minute by the Right Honourable the Governor General', 25 September, 1836, BL, Asia and Africa Collection, F/4/1684.

[9] 'Resolution of the Governor General', Political Department, 4 September, 1837, BL, Asia and Africa Collection, F/4/1684.

[10] The Asiatic Journal and Monthly Register for British India and Its Dependencies, 1832, Vol. 7, p. 84

[11] Colonel Hopkinson, letter to the Secretary to the Government of Bengal, General Department, Education, 2 December, 1873, No. 214, Assam Commissioner's File No. 471, Assam State Archive, Guwahati.

[12] Majority of Assamese literary historiographer starting from Hemchandra Goswami to Jogendra Narayan Bhuyan wrote that Bengalis were responsible for the initiation of Bengali as the official language of Assam in 1836. But historian H.K.Barpujari showed that this accusation has no documentary proof. Later Assamese literary critic Sibanath Barman and Prasenjit Choudhury also supported Barpujari.

[13] Oriya was regarded as a distinct language from Bengali in early nineteenth century itself as the Oriya translation of Carrey's *The Bible* was published in 1809.

[14]The Classical Journal, December, 1819, Vol. XL, p 400.

[15] Asiatic Society Journal and Monthly Register for British India and Its Dependencies, 1818, vol, 6, December, p. 623.

[16] Scott to Swinton, Feb 10, 1824 in Bhuyan: 1949, p. 524

[17] Letter from Capt. M.O. Boyd to the Deputy Commissioner of Durrang, 5 June, 1872, No. 80 in Assam Commissioner's File No. 471, Assam State Archive, Guwahati

[18] Asiatic Journal: 1832: vol.7:32.

[19] Jenkins, letter to W.M. Grey, Secretary to the Governor of Bengal, 7 December, 1854 in Selections From the Records of the Bengal Government, Calcutta,1855

[20] Samachar Darpan, 30 July, 1831.

[21] Despite much debates going on, Oriya was the official language of Orissa and Hindustani was the official language of Bihar area of Bengal province.

[22] Fakirmohan Senapati vividly described about the attitudes of the Bengali teachers appointed as Oriya teachers in his autobiography *Atmajeevancharit.*

[23] C.A Martin, letter to Colonel Hopkinson, Governor General's Agent, North East Frontier and Commissioner of Assam, 30 January,1873, No 1824 in Assam Commissioner's Office File No. 471, Assam State Archive, Guwahati

[24] Comparison in Indo – Chinese Languages in The Calcutta Christian Observer, Vol. VII, January to December, 1838

[25] The Missionary Magazine. Vol. 36-37, July, 1866: 283.

[26] Letter from Colonel Hopkinson, Governor General's Agent, North East Frontier and Commissioner of Assam to the Secretary to the Government of Bengal, Judicial Department, 20 March,1873, No 67 in Assam Commissioner's Office File No. 471, Assam State Archive, Guwahati

[27] Letter of M.O.Boyd, Assistant Commissioner of Mangaldoi to the Deputy Commissioner of Durrong, 5 June, 1872, no 80, in Assam Commissioner's Office File No. 471, Assam State Archive, Guwahati.

[28] Letter of Major J.F. Sherer, D.C., Nagaon , 19 June, 1872, No. 364, in Assam Commissioner's Office File No. 471, Assam State Archive, Guwahati.

[29] Letter of Captain AN. Philips, Assistant Commissioner, Sibsagar to Deputy Commissioner, Sibsagar, 10 June, 1872, No. 309 in Assam Commissioner's Office File No. 471, Assam State Archive, Guwahati.

[30] Letter of Officiating Inspector of Schools to Colonel Hopkinson, Governor General's Agent, North East Frontier and Commissioner of Assam, 30 January, 1873, No 1824 in Assam Commissioner's Office File No. 471, Assam State Archive, Guwahati.

[31] *Ibid*

[32] *Ibid*

[33] Memorandum by the people of Lower Assam to the Lt. Governor of Bengal, undated, unnumbered in Assam Commissioner's Office File No. 471, Assam State Archive, Guwahati

[34] *Ibid*

[35] Indian literary tradition did not have the practice of writing grammars in vernaculars. So, it was not an extra-ordinary case for Assamese that the first grammar of the language by an outsider. Other New-Indo-Aryan languages too got their first grammar by a non-speaker of the language. For example, N. Halhed wrote the first grammar of Bengali in Bengali text. Earlier Portuguese missionaries wrote some rudimentary Bengali grammar in Roman script.

Chapter III
Orality, Traditional Writing and Imperatives of Colonial Printing

3.1 Introduction

The transition of orality to writing and then printing is also the story of evolution of mankind. In Indian context, the historical relationship that framed the shift from orality to traditional writing and then the shift from traditional writing to print was an outcome of colonialism. This shift affected and engaged social, economic, political and other structures. It had also shaped the social history of Indian vernaculars as their standardization and modernization was extensively influenced by the technology of printing.

In literate societies, messages can be stored and transferred in absentia of the sender. In oral cultures, however, messages are always transferred in presence of the speaker. Oral tradition brings people together whereas the written tradition engenders greater individuality as reading is a rather solitary activity.

Unlike European tradition, pre-colonial Indian philological and aesthetic curiosity always pointed to *Vak* – the utterance, rather than

the written language. The way Indian tradition structures the internal practices of languages cannot be adequately captured by a standard distinction between oral and literate culture. Here, the distinction between literate or written and oral is not homogenous between the educated and uneducated or illiterate. Even literate Indians have their traditions and institutions of oral performance. In pre-colonial Assam, the written and oral administrative practices were in use. The Ahom kingdom specially appointed officers for writing *buranji*, the chronicles, but their judicial proceedings were held orally. The importance accorded to written records is culture specific and British and pre-colonial Assamese tradition stands on the opposite end of the scale. That is why most of the erstwhile Ahom officials could not adjust to the new colonial administration. A continuous shift from orality to written word and vice versa was also visible in medieval Vaishnavite literature as well as in the folk-literature of Assam.

The study of print came to the academic forefront with the writings of Elizabeth Eisenstein who established the relation between the impacts of printing with Protestant Reformation

(Eisenstein: 1979). Natalie Z. Davis and Roger Chartier's analyses of the impact of printing on early modern Europe have drawn attention to the transition of book as a cultural and commercial object (Davis: 1991 & Chartier: 1989). It also points to the new phenomenon of printed words' polarization with orality. Anderson emphasizes the impact of print capitalism on the formation of national identity (Anderson: 1983). He also underlines fixity and standardization as the defining feature of print culture. But later scholarships question this hypothesis and present counter hypotheses that fixity and printing was not always identical and nationalism cannot be associated with only print capitalism. Adrian Johns argues that earlier printed books did not gain fixity easily and it was associated with vagueness (Johns:1998). Likewise, in south Asian context, printing and nationalism was not always simultaneous (Chatterjee:1993, Smith:1998, Ghosh:2006). On the contrary, print language and literature were vital instruments for crafting social identities in colonial India (Ghosh:2006).

In Indian context, the shift was not homogenous as its western counterpart. Here, the shift was not only the result of the printing

technology. It was also accompanied by the changing attitude of a new generation of authors about their native literary traditions as well as the new literary trends imported from Western literature. The technology also opened up avenues for creating grammars, dictionaries and many literary genres in Indian vernaculars which were not in practice in most of the pre-colonial India. A new translation practice which emphasized on translation from English into Indian vernaculars as well as translation of Indian classical literature and folklore into English and other European languages came into force. That practice was different from the earlier one way medieval Indian translation practice which was based on translation and adaptation of classical literature into Indian vernaculars. Blackburn argues that the print did not create new texts and print did not usher in a new cultural or literary era in colonial south India (Blackburn: 2001). But his hypotheses seem to be not applicable for all of the Indian languages. This chapter will explore the inter-related themes by examining the transition of orality and traditional writing practices to colonial printing and the impact of this practice in the language and literature in the nineteenth century Assam. It is going

to explore whether and how much the Assamese language and literature was divested of cultural associations by the early users of the print technology. Whether the strong link between language, oral literature and cultural history was ignored or suppressed at the modernization or the standardization process of the language? What does the rationalist drive to change language into a collection of lexico-semantic units, rather than a collection of pragmatically useful registers and genres, affect the prospects for language revitalization?

The management of power through an internalized regime of control, as Foucault's work has showed, had become an important and integral part of the colonial policy in the nineteenth century (Naregal: 2001: 150). It wanted to exert power primarily through authority over the norms of discursive production, reception and dissemination (Ibid). Scholars working on the rise of print culture in the West have emphasized on the impact of the shift in reading practices and the ensuing laicization of culture in the formation of modern subjectivity and collective identities. Initially, the colonial government hesitated about the introduction of Western education in

the Indian colony, but the overall ideological advantage of regulating literary as well as literate practices through the introduction of print paved the way for the introduction of English language and literature. Elphinstone Report of 1818 in this regard confirmed the attitude of the colonial administration:

> I do not perceive anything that we can do to improve the morals of the people except by improving their education. There are already schools in small towns, and in many villages; but reading is confined to *Brahmins, Baniyans*, and such of the agricultural classes that have to do accounts. I am not sure that our establishing free schools would alter this state of things, and it might create a suspicion of some concealed design on our part. It would be more practicable and more useful to give a direction to the reading of those who do learn, of which the press is so easily affords the means.[1]

An analysis of cultural history of nineteenth century Assam points to prolific print materials in Assamese during the period of displacement and after the relocation of the language spurred by the sudden identity crisis of the language. Colonial authority's repeated refusal to acknowledge Assamese as a separate language, the

missionaries' initiative for creating a modern Assamese language based on a new orthography, the counter actions by Assamese intellectuals, and later the obscurity of printed textbooks in Assamese are some of the features that played important roles in the printing history of nineteenth century Assam. This chapter will trace and explore the journey of print itself as well as its impact on Assamese linguistic history, formation of nationalism, and emergence of a new generation of young Assamese intellectuals.

3.2. Orality to Print: the shift in Indian languages

Orality is one of the most important features of ancient Indian literature. Before written tradition came into existence, Indian classical literature was orally transmitted to the next generation. Even after writing down a text was in practice, oral performance or oral transmission did not lose its prominence till the colonial period. However, the history of orality in literature has not been well recorded in literary histories of the country and this has to be inferred from literary references and epigraphical guesswork.

3.3 Orality in Assamese literature

References in medieval Assamese literature suggest that a rich oral tradition was present in Assamese. Hemchandra Goswami who edited *Asamiya Sahityar Caneki* or Typical Selections from Assamese Literature suggests that the period of oral tradition had started in the seventh century and it continued to the ninth century (Goswami:2002:25). Later literary historians placed the beginning of Assamese oral tradition in as late as twelfth century. There was not any evidence of existence of an Assamese language in the seventh century A.D. except the Chinese traveler Huen tsang's oft-quoted reference about the difference of the language of the region from *Madhyadesa,* i.e. Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. But the reference did not imply the existence of a language having literary tradition of its own. It might merely suggest about some distinctive features of the language of the region. It can be assumed that oral traditions of song, dance, drama and folk narrative pre-dated the earliest written Assamese texts, but their contents or cultural status at that point of time cannot be verified now.

3.4 **Orality and pre-colonial written tradition in Assamese literature**

The continuous shift between orality and written condition noticed in other Indian languages is a major feature of pre-colonial Assamese literature too. Besides the usual folk-literature repertoire, the so-called written literature of medieval Assam was also orally oriented. An easy transition between texts and performance had given pre-colonial Assamese literature a unique fluidity and flexibility which blurred the difference between literate and illiterate. For example, *charit puthis*, the hagiographies of medieval Assamese *Vaishnava* saints, were textualized; but their oral performance became part of the daily rituals of the *satras*, i.e. Vaishnavite monasteries. On the other hand, performance oriented folk- dramas like *ojapali* also used written texts as *Manasa kavya*. Moreover, as the most of the people were illiterate, written books were also orally transmitted and memorized as normal oral literature.

3.5 **Print and colonialism in Assam**

3.5.1 **Print and vernacular**

The printing of Assamese books drastically changed the course of history of books as well as the history of reading in Assam. It also altered the relation between the author and the readers. The beginning of printed books also marks the beginning of new style and fonts for letters; new orthography and new punctuation marks for a new literary language suitable for new literary practices. As a result of these changes and innovations, the Assamese vernacular acquired new perspectives as an object of knowledge as well as a medium of knowledge. With colonialism as the background, print produced the shift of looking at one's own language through the eyes of others and then standardizing and modernizing it with a Western model. In the context of the Assamese language, the missionaries were prominent and strongly linked with other institutions of colonial modernization. They produced the early printed books in Assamese and thus using a spoken language as the literary language. This led a fundamental shift in the way

Assamese people viewed their language. It was not any longer just the mother tongue; but a tool for self expression that also became the national identity marker.

The history of printed books in Assamese had started with the Assamese translation of the *Bible* which was a part of the pan-Indian project carried out by William Carrey of British Baptist mission based at Serampore. In 1813, the first part of this book was published. The project was continued up to 1833 when the *New Testament* of the *Bible* was printed at Serampore. But it did not open the floodgate of Assamese printed texts as the project was too isolated and far away to have any impact in Assam.

3.5.2 **Coming of print to Assam**

Printing technology came to Assam as part of the colonial project in the third decade of the nineteenth century. It had started with the initiative by Major Jenkins, who invited missionaries to the province and assured them of providing amenities and monetary assistance.

In 1836, American Baptist missionaries arrived at Sadiya with a printing press (Barpujari: 1999: 135). After abandoning their preliminary work stations, the missionary finally settled at Sivasagar in 1839 and here starts the printing history in Assam. However, in 1813 itself *Dharma Pustak,* the first Assamese printed book was published by the Serampore missionaries. But this Assamese prose version of the Bible was indigestible even for the American missionaries. They discarded it and took up a project of the *Bible* translation which was completed in early twentieth century In fact, the first Assamese printed book never gained popular acceptance and it did not produce a new era of a new technology. The Assamese language had to wait another twenty years before the actual print revolution.

Reliance on the language of the native as the medium of their evangelical mission was the common policy of the missionaries throughout the nineteenth century. After deliberating extensively on their medium of mission for Assam which has been discussed in the previous chapter, they finally decided on the Assamese language.

Like in other languages, the missionaries stationed in Assam began with printing of two types of books. The books were either religious tracts or language tools as the missionaries need to study, learn and then teach the language to the new arrivals at the mission. The colonial officers and traders also benefited from the second category and hence, grammars, vocabularies, dictionaries along with translation of scriptures dominated the first phase of printing in nineteenth century Assam.

It was Charles Bruce, the trade agent of the company at Sadiya, who proposed for setting up a Christian mission at the eastern frontier. Accordingly, Jenkins wrote to the secretary to the government of Bengal for inviting the American Baptists to establish a mission at Sadiya. He promised to give a monetary incentive of one thousand rupees per month to the mission and it would be doubled if they had a printing press at the mission. The American missionaries set up their first mission at Sadiya and then at Jaipur. But rebellion and tropical deceases forced them to wound up those

missions and they finally settled at Sivasagar. It was evident from records that Jenkins showed more interest in the mission than believed by the Assamese literary historians that generally stressed the strained relationship between the missionaries and the colonial administrators which became more prominent in the time of linguistic debate of the province (Neog: 1981: Sarma:1986). But it seems that the discord was a temporary phase and the mission was assisted by the administration all along as the missionary works complemented the colonial administration and it added a human face to the administration. Missionary historians acknowledged the help and contribution of Major Jenkins and other colonial officials to the mission. This help included 'contribution of money', attentions to the comfort of the missionaries', and 'the erections of commodious dwellings and other buildings for their accommodation' (Gammell: 1849: 221). In addition to his earlier commitments, Major Jenkins provided a large printing press to the mission and also an additional annual sum of five hundred rupees towards its support. He also contributed five hundred rupees for replenishing the fonts of type (Ibid: 217). This new font of type was brought by Mr. Cutter from

Calcutta in April, 1839 (Ibid: 218). Mr. Cutter was found to be 'constantly employed at the two presses' (Ibid: 215). In 1839 itself manuscripts of *Gospel of Matthew* in Assamese and the Khamti dialect were ready for printing. After coming from Calcutta with an additional set of type, Mr. Cutter commenced printing them. In early summer of 1842, school books and scriptures printed at the mission press were available. In 1845, Captain Hannay made some brick houses and also a brick godown for the mission which was acknowledged by Brown in one of his letter. He was more impressed by the godown as it would be a secure and safe place for types which points to another aspect of the nineteenth century printing in Assam – the value of font for the printers.[2] The missionaries acquired fonts from different sources – the first set came with the press itself from Calcutta. There are records about the wooden blocks they had made but there is not any mention about making of fonts in Assam. On the contrary, *Orunodoi* publishes news item on the coming of type font from Calcutta by river route (Neog: 1983:169).

Orunodoi had been found in many respects to be more efficient than ordinary tracts in breaking down the natives' prejudices and enlightening their ignorance (Gammell: 1849: 224). *The Baptist Mission Magazine*, in 1862, published a letter from Mr. Ward, the in-charge of Assam Mission, which stressed the better and more influential position of the journal:

> The *Orunodoi* has an increasing circulation, and seems to awaken growing interest in the native mind. By this paper, we reach hundreds of readers who cannot be reached by any other means, and who, if we attempted to preach to them – which we have not the means to do at present, - would not hear. But here we mix in the knowledge of gospel truth along with news and matter which they are becoming eager for: and thus, all unawares to themselves, their modes of thought are undergoing a gradual but certain change.[3]

3.5.3 **Print and Assamese enterprises**

The coming of print created a sensation among the Assamese writers which was reflected in their writings. Several writings, especially poems on the marvels of the printing press were

published in the *Orunodoi* (Neog: 1983: 902- 903). It is interesting to note that despite being in good terms with the missionaries and printing his earlier books at the mission press, Anadaram Dhekiyal Phukan choose to buy a press at Calcutta in 1852 for printing his later books. And thus, he became the first Assamese printer and publisher. Anandaram never explained his decision of buying a press exclusively for printing his own works. According to Gunabhiram, the biographer of Anandaram, the press was bought as printing at other presses became costlier (Barua: 1992: 94). But he also mentioned that the first part of this series containing legal proceedings of the previous year was published at the Mission press itself. Then Anandaram shifted the base of the printing works to Calcutta and he had to appoint two persons for managing and supervising the press.

The second press was the *Dharma Prakash Jantra*, set up at *Auniati Satra*, a *Vaishava* monastery. In fact it was the first native press of the province which was established by Dattadev Goswami, the *Satradhikar* or the religious head of the *Satra* in 1871. This press

challenged the missionary dominance in the Assamese print culture which was used for propagation of Christianity. *Asam Bilasini*, the second Assamese news paper was published from that press in 1871. Like the mission press, this press also worked for cultural and religious self representation and social identity. Moreover, it was also a tool of power for the Vaishnavites which could challenge the hegemony of the colonial printing and created an alternative space different from the missionary propagated Western norms. This press printed and published new texts, both religious and secular. But that press created an impact among the new readership by creating an alternative indigenous religious space with the publishing of major Vaishnava manuscripts. These texts got a much wider readership as the earlier circulation of these hand written texts was very limited. More or less this trend also effectively resisted the missionary project of spreading Christianity among the Assamese community. Despite the inferior quality of its products, the *Auniati* press thus became instrumental in the process of identity formation in the nineteenth century Assam. It was also instrumental in providing the much needed self-confidence to the new Assamese intelligentsia

and entrepreneurs that the print technology could be used indigenously without the help or patronization from the colonial power. It was later bought by Krishnachandra Bhattacharya and was set up at Jorhat. The second chapter of the *Asam Bilasini* was published from this press. A number of Assamese newspaper and journals followed *Assam Bilasini* in the later part of the nineteenth century.

3.5.4. Categories of publications

It is fascinating to take note about the range of the publications from these presses. The publishing list of the mission press is somehow predictable as it followed the path of the other foreign missions and that list included translations of the scripture, text books, grammars and dictionaries, magazines as well as several pre-colonial texts and specimens of folklore such as folktales and *buranji*s which were not religious in character.

Language tools such as wordbooks, phrases and vocabularies, dictionaries and grammars of native languages were very important for the missionaries and those were used for both themselves as well as their intended students. Therefore, from the beginning of the mission in Assam, writing and printing of such matters were delegated to different missionaries. These language tools tried to make Assamese accessible to non-speakers of the language with reference to English. For example, Cutter explains the Assamese vowel sound /ɒ/ with reference to English '/o/' as in 'pole' and as /o/ in 'for' (Cutter: 1877:iii). It is interesting to note that before the 1859 grammar by Hemchandra Barua, no book on language by a native speaker was published in Assam.[4]

The contributions by missionaries to the study of Assamese culture and language and then bringing them out as printed matters in the nineteenth century was the most important and visible effort. They were the most active participants in the project of highlighting the unique features of the Assamese language which separated it

from Bengali in the earlier part of that century. Much before the Assamese language was declared as the official language, numerous linguistic publications had appeared. Barring one publication from Hemchandra Barua[5], all these linguistic studies were done and published by the missionaries. But this process was not an exception – missionaries in almost all of their foreign missions started their missionary project by learning the local language and then publishing linguistic teaching aides like vocabularies and grammars. The same pattern was also visible in the early twentieth century Belgian Congo where colonialism and missionary activities controlled the linguistic activities of the country. The Catholic and Protestant missionaries of that country began their missionary activities by learning local languages from natives and collecting words and useful phrases and by observing grammatical rules. The earlier linguistic publications included vocabularies and grammars which were required by the missionaries for oral preaching as well as translating scriptures into the local languages. Fabian stated that the translation project was designed for use by the missionaries in their oral work of evangelization rather than for

their illiterate African converts as 'perfect command of native language' was considered as a 'grave obligation' of the missionaries (1986:76). The production of language guides on all levels, from word lists to grammars and dictionaries was determined by the same practical concerns which were parts of colonial project of creating an education system which can make a class of employable persons. Later mass- publication of these works were used as teaching aides for the literacy project initiated by the missionaries and supported and sponsored by the colonial authority.

The nineteenth century missionary project in Assam also was of the same pattern. The knowledge of local language was given top priority and several missionaries were assigned to master one or two local languages. For example, Dr. Nathan Brown, a missionary and linguist, was appointed to study the Assamese language and the Khamti dialect. Miles Bronson also wrote a word book in English, Assamese and Sinpho in his first year in Assam.

In the first ten years in Assam, the missionaries printed fifty five books in Assamese, English, Bengali, Shyan and Naga. Most of these books were related to the scripture. Others were either elementary text books or language teaching aides like books of phrases and vocabularies. This trend was somehow changed in the second decade. In 1853, Bronson submitted a list of their publications in the previous year to the colonial authority where the diversion can be easily noticeable [Table 3.1]. The mission press started to publish texts other than religious texts written by non-missionary Assamese writers.

The emergence of public reading in nineteenth century Assam was mainly initiated by newspapers and magazines published in the province. *Orunodoi, Assam Bilasini, Assam News, Assam Dipak, Assam Tora, Mou, Assam Bandhu, Jonaki, Bijuli* are the major Assamese magazines of the nineteenth century. Most of them documented the transition of the oral tradition to the print culture of the people of the province. This transition was not always smooth.

Table 3.1

List of Books and Pamphlets printed and published from the American Baptist Mission Press, Sivasagar, Assam during the year 1852

Place	Name of Press	Name of each Work	Description of each Work	No of copies of each Work strike off	No of Copies of each work sold	Price of each Work per Copy
Seebsagur, Upper Assam	The American Baptist Mission Press	Buronji Byug Kotha	8 vo., 2 pages, Assamese	510	Gratuitous	Distribution
		Report of Assam Mission	12 mo, 100 pages, English	600	Gratuitous	Distribution
		Holy Incarnation	12 mo, 40 pages, Assamese	1000	Gratuitous	Distribution
		Religious Address	12 mo, 12 pages, Assamese	1000	Gratuitous	Distribution
		Memoir of Jun Harmaden	18 mo, 16 pages, Assamese	100	Gratuitous	Distribution
		Harmony of the 4 Gospels	8 vo., 1 pages, 4 sig, Assamese	300	Gratuitous	Distribution
		Psalms of David	8 vo., 1 pages, 3 sig. Assamese	60	Gratuitous	Distribution
		Assam Company's Monthly Account Sheet and Miscellaneous printing				

(Prepared from Long: 1855: 106)

3.5.5 **The Transition**

The changes from a community of oral performance based culture which was related to a religious context to a private, secular and silent reading was abrupt. The change of the medium from verse to a prose style added more confusion for the first generation reader of print in colonial Assam. They were used to the narration and then explanation by the literate reader or *pathak*. Now they were facing the new world of printed texts which was not targeted only on salvation of self or *atma*. They had to clear the first hurdle of illiteracy to enjoy these texts as new texts were meant for individual reading. In pre-colonial Assam, reading was limited to high castes like Brahmins and Kayasthas as generally only they had access to literacy. Moreover, the limited numbers of manuscripts meant a more limited readership. The arrival of print and growth of literature paved the way for much broader readership among the cross section of society. A larger social participation from the common people in literary activities was a focal point in the socio-cultural history of the nineteenth century Assam. In pre-print literary culture,

such participation was possible for folk-literature only. The mainstream literary activities were dominated either by upper castes or by elites of the society as formal education in pre-colonial Assam was accessible to them only. Thus pre-colonial illiterate readership had to be content with passive participation – the texts were read out to them by literate and professional readers. They were not supposed to be the active participant or producer of elite literature. They could actively participate only in the performance of *ankiya bhaonas*, and *nam-kirtans*, two popular *Vaishnava genres*. Oral literature was the domain of the common people which they could create and perform without hesitation or inhibition. Print technology, for the first time blurred that difference between the literary activity of elites and commoners. The so-called non-elite literary genres also entered the domain of elite literature with the help of printing. The growth of literature among the common people also encouraged them to create different genres of literature. It is interesting to note that the first modern Assamese biography was on the life of a common man who died much before completing his education (Sarma: 1872).[6]

3.5.6 Print technology and Assamese language

The printing history was influenced by dislocation and the later relocation of Assamese vernacular as the official language and the medium of education in Assam. The American Baptist Missionaries accorded press and printing as a major apparatus for the spread of Christianity. Gammell, in his *History of American Baptist Missions in Asia, Africa, Europe and North America*, described missionary 'system' of establishing their network, which were "substantially the same in every land":

> The opening of schools, the operations of the press, conversions at the Zayat and other places of public resort, together with frequent excursions into the country around them, must always be made the principal agencies on which they rely for the promulgation of the gospel. (Gammell: 1849: 215).

The establishment and spread of vernacular education in the later part of the nineteenth century had brought the print maters within an easier reach of a larger social group. Apart from new social

groups, different gender and age groups also came to the fold of the print world. It also helped in the spreading of vernacular print materials required as text books and for leisure reading.

In 1852, the American Baptist Mission Press had two iron printing presses in operation and they executed printing in Assamese, Bengali, English and Shyan languages. The missionaries had in their possession one new Pica font, one small long primer size, one small font great primer and one font of double Great Primer Assamese and Bengali types. For English, they had one old font Pica size, one font Long primer size, one font *Nonperil* for notes and headings, and a variety of very small fonts for Title pages and Job works. The press also had a small font of Burmese and Shyan type. In the foundry, there were a set of Bengali and Assamese matrices of Pica size, a set of Burmese and *Hujan* matrices, Great primer size, three type moulds, and a lead mould etc (Long: 1855: 107). It is noteworthy that the Baptist Mission Press was the only press in the entire province till 1871 and, hence, the

assets of the Mission press were the only available printing tools in the province.

The colonial authority had obtained information about the published texts and other materials by the missionaries regularly. In an 1853 correspondence to Captain Holroyd, the Deputy Commissioner of Sivasagar, Bronson submitted two lists that comprise all the printed matters printed at the mission press (Long 1855: 105-106).

Throughout the nineteenth century, the process of standardization of Assamese language manifested through the development of print and media in Assam. The process of differentiation from Bengali language and culture was one of the major linguistic features of the nineteenth century Assamese print history. Simultaneously the process of assimilation and to some extent differentiation among different dialects of the Assamese language was also going on which was culminated in the early part of the twentieth century. In 1829, the first printed and published

book by any Assamese was in Bengali. Haliram Dhekiyal Phukan wrote in Bengali probably for two reasons - the book was meant for the outsiders only and Assamese was not recognized as a different language from Bengali till that time. Maniram Dewan used a mixture of Bengali and Assamese as the medium of his book on history *Buranji Bibek Ratna*. There may be two reasons for this mixture of language – Maniram was not exposed to the Bengali like Haliram and secondly he might be using the language used by the Assamese elites of that period. Anandaram, on the other hand, used a language that had its base on the new Assamese prose of the Baptist missionaries. At that point of time, the missionary style Assamese was the dominant and prominent form of literary language. But gradually questions were raised about the authenticity and purity of that form. In the second decade itself, a debate had been started in *Orunodoi* about the model or form the Assamese language should have. The camps were clearly divided – the missionary group vowed for their type of language which was based on the spoken forms of Sivasagar. The second group was made of persons who had knowledge of Sanskrit and considered Sanskrit as

the mother of Assamese. Hemchandra Barua led the second group and to substantiate his view on the language he published an Assamese grammar, which was the first Assamese grammar written by a speaker in Assamese. In his grammar, Barua distanced himself from the missionary group as he emphasized that Assamese should acknowledge Sanskrit model as both the languages were related. And it was most interesting to note that this grammar was printed at the Mission Press itself. *Orunodoi* also published a review of the book and Barua was praised for his labour. But he was criticized for his leaning on Sanskrit grammatical rules and spelling modes.

The emergence of printed books changed the reading habits of Assamese readers in the nineteenth century. However, it is interesting to note that other traditional modes of reading coexisted with the new mode for quite a long period. Prior to the penetration of print, it is quite likely that the concept of private reading existed only sporadically. The traditional *Sanchi*-bark manuscripts were to be handled with extreme care while reading to prevent damage. The orthography meant for traditional manuscripts constituted a major

determinant of the mode of reading. Letters, words, lines, verses, commentaries followed one another without a space and hence, deciphering the text demanded a high level of scholarship, knowledge of prosody, and the possession of a vast vocabulary. Absence of any of these qualities paved the way for miss-interpretation of the texts. The mode of writing of these texts made reading aloud the only way of reading to comprehend the meaning. Reading the same text again and again enabled the reader to memorize the text thoroughly and thus reciting from memory became a corollary to this mode of public reading. Moreover, some of the illiterate listeners also could recite the entire text from memory. Generally, public reading was performed at religious occasions, fairs and festivals and sanctity was associated with all these contexts. This kind of oral performance restricted the listeners from personally interpreting the text as the interpretation was mediated by the performer himself. The availability of the text in multiple copies and printed form had changed the way Assamese readers' interpretation of the text. Earlier interpretation of a text depended on the performer and it was shared by a numbers of

listeners who attended the same reading session. Now that had changed to individual interpretation of the text. The new mode of silent and individual reading became popular among the neo-literates. The older practice of community session of reading also existed along with the new practice. Besides these two modes, a curious new practice assisted by two other practices also came into existence in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. After listening to a reading by a literate reader, an illiterate anchor could held a recital of the entire text from memory. Several Assamese intellectuals of the period, in their autobiographies, mentioned about this reading habit of their female relatives (Choudhuri: 1999: 12).

The print also influenced the Assamese writers of the nineteenth century to change the nature and scope of literature so much that it was accorded a separate tag as modern Assamese literature. The transition was abrupt as it did not evolve from erstwhile Assamese literary tradition. The new tradition deliberately moved away from local literary tradition in the first decades as it was considered as outdated by the neo- educated. The missionaries and

the colonial government wanted to spread Christianity based Western literature and culture among the natives. There was a reasonable difference between the languages that were used in different genres and styles of pre-colonial Assamese literature. The difference between the folk-literature as well as *panchali* literature which were outside the fold of the contemporary elite literature and other mainstream literature can be easily noticeable. The cause might be that the first category was meant for oral performance and the second was mainly for literary reading which was mediated by a professional reader for illiterate listeners. The literary language of the second group was a kind of barrier for the mass as the language was far removed from spoken form and influenced by Sanskrit vocabulary and grammar. Of course, the prose of seventeenth-eighteenth century *buranjis* was not much influenced by Sanskrit. Rather the vocabulary of a *buranji* varied depending on the subject of that particular book. The *Padshah Buranji*, for example, used many words from Persian- Arabic origin as this *buranji* was based on Moghul-Ahom relationship. However, the prose of the *buranji*s did not change the reader- audience equation in pre-colonial Assam

as they were not available for mass consumption. The *Charit puthis* or the hagiographies of the Vaishnavite saints, which were also free from Sanskrit expressions, were meant for *satras only*. The language used in folk-literature was believed to be based on spoken forms; but it was not considered as a literary genre by the elite litterateurs. Hence the language of the modern Assamese literature was a fresh and new phenomenon in the literary history of Assam. The missionaries had used the existing prose model of *buranjis* as it was the most secular genre. But spelling and syntax had been changed so much that it had got a new look. The missionaries led by Brown and Bronson emphasized that the medium of literature should be based on spoken forms and spellings should follow pronunciation of the common people. This policy was continued through the next twenty years when the missionaries agreed to review their policy[7]. They also admitted that any change in the language should be done by the native speakers, not by foreigners[8]. The second stage was started by Hemchandra Barua who tried to change the way the Assamese prose have been written by the missionary school. Interestingly, the grammar which was the first

and most effective attempt by any Assamese to mould the language by moving away from the missionaries was printed at the Mission press itself in 1859. An unnamed reviewer reviewed this grammar in Orunodoi and he criticized that abundant use of Sanskrit letters as well as united letters would make the book difficult for the young students. He also complained about Barua's methodology of transliteration which according to the reviewer, followed Bengali pronunciations, not Assamese (Saikia: 2002: 158). He cited the example of the transliteration of the word Russian with the sibilant alphabet \s.\ which is actually pronounced in Assamese as \x\. But just after one year of the grammar's publication, the newspaper group itself had started to initiate some of Barua's modification in *Orunodoi*. This was the first initiative of streamlining the excessive differences of the two groups. In the latter history of the mission in Assam, *Orunodoi* did not get much coverage which can be attributed to the failure of the journal to convert. It seems that the language of the journal acted as a barrier between the propagators and the Assamese community and it did not get much success as expected from a first ever journal should get. There was no doubt that the

journal had got a large readership as evident from the subscribers' list published in the journal (ibid: 465-474). But it did not achieve the main target of conversion among the local intelligentsia. Unlike in Bengal, no intellectual or writer from nineteenth century Assam converted to Christianity[9]. But a majority of that was drawn from the colonial officials, tea planters and missionaries stationed at the province who were already Christians. The second large group consisted of native government officials which group was already using Bengali language at their office and not very much interested at the linguistic style adopted by the missionaries.

Anandaram, a colonial official who himself propagated for the installation of Assamese as the official language, did not try to change the missionary style. It seems that he was too grateful to the missionaries for using Assamese as their official medium to question or challenge their style. At the time of his premature death in 1859, Anandaram was engaged in writing an Anglo- Assamese dictionary which was getting published serially in the missionary journal (Saikia: 2002:146- 149). He also wrote extensively on Assamese

language, its distinctive features and the literary heritage. But he was not occupied with the difference of the missionary style with the erstwhile literary language. Nor did he say anything about the pronunciation based spelling system adopted by the missionaries. He followed this system in his dictionary and hence it can be inferred that he did not oppose it (ibid). Moreover his other writings in Assamese such as *Asomiya Lorar Mitra*, a book meant for young Assamese also bore the trademark of missionary style. He too followed the spoken version and his spellings were based on it and neither in Assamese literary tradition nor in Sanskrit like the practice of contemporary Bengali linguists and authors.

After the restoration of Assamese as the medium of school education, the colonial government tried to streamline the orthography of the language of the text-books. Apart from the normal school going students, Assamese text-books became important for the colonial officials serving in Assam too as they had to pass Assamese vernacular examination from 1876.[10] However, the officials serving in the districts of Cachar, Goalpara and Garo Hills were exempted as the knowledge of Assamese would be

"useless" there (ibid). The government tried to implement a uniform orthography in school books as "great variety" existed at that moment:

Great variety exists at present in the spelling of (so-called) Assamese books. The set of primers now introduced, will probably become the standard of spelling throughout the Assam proper. You should therefore be careful that their orthography is as much according to ordinary literary cannons as may be. For instance, the CC would not tolerate the changing of (ch) into (s) merely because in Assamese, as in Bengalee, ch is nowadays pronounced as s. When you have brought these primers to a precise and reasonable standard of orthography, you may introduce them. [11]

3.5.7 Thematic preferences

The history of printing in the nineteenth century Assam showed some marked preference towards some distinct themes. The earlier writers used this technology for pedagogy, reformation and propagation. Except one or two, most of the writers were non-native speaker of the language and they used the press for changing the

mindsets of the mass and got them ready for conversion. The second stage was a crucial period as more Assamese writers began to write in the Assamese language and their writings were mostly directed to the uplifting and modernization of fellow citizens. Their style and attitude was also different from the earlier stage. This generation of writers was from the same root and they shared a common tradition with their target readers. The third stage had started on pedagogy as Assamese was restored as the official language and therefore, textbooks were of prime importance. Most of the contemporary renowned writers were engaged in writing school text books in the 1870s shortly after the restoration of Assamese. The nature of the text-books did not vary from the earlier text-books written by the missionaries, but the language and the attitude of the writers had changed. And the young writers who benefited from this exercise directed their energy towards a national identity formation process based on the language and they created the firsts among almost all the Western or so-called modern literary genres like short story, novels, romantic poetry and so on.

In 1813, when the printing of Assamese books had started outside Assam, the printers were essentially non-Assamese except Atmaram Sharma.[12] It was part of a larger project of Dr. Carrie who planned to translate the *Bible* to all major Indian languages. The project in the language of Assam took more than twenty years and it also oversaw the evolution of the connotation for the language which changed from the Assam language in 1813 to the Assamese language in 1833. But American Baptist missionaries were not satisfied with Carrie's version and they started the project anew. The translation of other religious tracts and psalms were also a part of this project of the missionaries in their first decade in Assam (Table 3.1). Preparation of language tools both for the native students and non-native missionaries and others was the other project that was given top most priority by the mission as the proficiency of the local language would enable the missionaries to propagate the Christianity to the natives in their local language. Moreover, these books could be used as school text-books at the mission schools. At the initial years mission schools were established at every missionary stations as well as in the neighbouring towns and

villages. Generally managed by the ladies of the mission and aided by English ladies residing there and in part by native assistants either belonging to the country or obtained from Kolkata, these schools had about one thousand students. The curriculum mainly consists of religious texts as the schools aimed to instruct the students in "the doctrine of the gospel" (Gammell: 1849; 223). Introduction to Western education was considered to be the gateway as it would distance the natives from their cultural roots. That is why the grammars and dictionaries of the local languages were analyzed and structured with a western model. It is interesting to note that the first grammar of the Assamese language was done by William Robinson, a British Baptist missionary and a successor of Carrey (Robinson: 1839). And it had the signature mark of Carrey School that wanted to uniformly structure the Indian languages in a western model. This grammar was not aimed for native speakers. Contents of this grammar book were organized to cater to the interest of non-native speakers entirely for official and business communications and hence sections of the grammar were selected:

The rules of Prosody have been altogether omitted, because they seem an obsolete object of which is of little interest to European students, and are rather a matter of curiosity than of real utility in a language like the Assamese (Robinson: 1839: ii).

Robinson was in Assam for at least four years before writing the grammar.[13] But his grammar did not seem to be based on the rules of spoken Assamese or local literary tradition. For example, his section on the particles of sudden prohibition and expletives were entirely based on Bengali and all the examples were Bengali too (Robinson: 1839: 61). The section on the particle of comparison was also classified like Bengali, as the classical form used by the learned[14] and the common mode. But the examples were either not applicable to Assamese or too Sanskritized :

Dsonat koi teonr mukh kanti mati

Her face is brighter than moon. (Robinson: 1839: 25)

The second grammar on Assamese was also by a non-native speaker. Nathan Brown, an American Baptist missionary was

entrusted for writing grammars of different local languages and dialects and his grammar on Assamese was published in 1848 as a part of this project. Before that Baptist missionaries published a wordbook of English, Assamese and Sinpho by Miles Bronson (Bronson: 1839) and a vocabulary of the Assamese language (Cutter: 1841). But it is interesting to note that Dr. Brown started to write that book as a compilation of some grammatical rules that are useful for the students:

> The following Notices do not claim to be regarded as a Grammar of the Asamese Language; nor were they prepared with a view to publication in their present state. They were commenced with the intention of printing only a few sheets, for private use, of the most common grammatical forms; but the work having extended beyond what was anticipated, it may not. (Brown: 1848: iii)

The third group may cover the school level textbooks the missionaries prepared for their mission schools. In the first batch of printed book at the mission press in Assam, there were books meant

for the schools. Though the emphasis was on religious instruction, some elementary concepts of alphabets and arithmetic were required for the students and hence the preparation of such books in Assamese as well as in other local languages got attention from the missionaries in the initial stage.

The 1850s emerged as the decade of the Assamese neo-intellectual writers who had Western education and tasted English literature as well as Western civilization. It is interesting to note that almost all of these writers were influenced by the missionaries. Several of these writers like Anandaram Dhekiyal Phukan and Gunabhiram Barua were guided by the colonial officials and missionaries since their childhood. Those who did not had close connection with the colonial people were also influenced by their literary activities. Hemchandra who later compelled the missionaries to change their spelling modes, also started his literary carrier in *Orunodoi* itself. [15]

An interesting development in the later nineteenth century was the formation of Assam School Book Society. The Society was established by the government for requisition, scrutiny and approval of school text books for schools in Assam. It created a competitive atmosphere for the young as well as established writers of Assam to write school texts on different subjects for different classes. The society also announced cash incentives for the best book in a category which encouraged many to write a text book. There was an extensive debate going on the structure and the medium of education even after the declaration of 1873. There were two very important Government notification on the medium shortly after the restoration. In an 1874 notification by the Chief Commissioner, Assam, the Assamese vernacular was declared as the medium of primary and middle class schools. However, " if the boys understand Bengalee better than Assamese, or any other language – for instance Kachari better than Assamese, the teaching of the Vernacular, which in Primary schools will be a great extent oral, may be carried on in that language." [16] In another notification two months

letter it was allowed to study Classical Bengalee in the three higher classes of higher class schools.[17]

3.5.8 Standardization of the Assamese script

Assamese script was a major problem for the beginners of Assamese printing. The first group of the printers who printed Assamese books at Serampore used the Bengali script itself. Absence of a printable Assamese script amongst the major Eastern languages may be observed in the accompanying list (Figure 4). The absence of Assamese /r/ and /w/ in the Bengali script poses a major hurdle for Assamese printers. But the American missionaries used the Bengali font with slight modifications of the two letters /r/ and /w/ from the first issue of *Orunodoi* where Sivasagar, the place of publication was spelled as /siwasagar/. Still they were accused of not using the letter /w/ in all possible situations by Hemchandra Barua. Actually, rather than usage, it was a battle of orthography between the missionaries and Barua. Missionaries did not use that

letter where it was not phonetically present. Barua emphasized on orthography. The missionary school later had to accommodate Barua-style orthography in 1860s not to antagonize the emerging and demanding Assamese readership who actively participated in that debate. At the same time the missionaries did not reject their orthographic style which was evident from the orthography of the Bronson's dictionary. Published in 1867, much later than officially changing the orthographic style, this dictionary still followed the pronunciation based style initiated by Joduram Deka Barua in 1839. This ambiguity maintained by them is a pointer towards the dilemma between differentiating between Sanskrit and *bhasa*, the term they generally used for Assamese and also expanding their readership. The orthography of the American Baptist missionaries was influenced by various factors. Firstly, there was not any established norm of orthography.

Figure 4

ALPHABET. PLATE XII.

SPECIMENS OF ORIENTAL ALPHABETS.

The Basis of most of these seems to be the Sanscrit.

ALL OF THEM ARE WRITTEN LIKE THE EUROPEAN FROM LEFT TO RIGHT.

Sanscrit or Nagari Alphabet.	Tamulian Alphabet.	Bengalese Alphabet used by the Bramins of Bengal for writing Sanscrit.	Birman Alphabet used in Ava, Aracan &c.	Telinga Alphabet.	Alphabet used by the Lamas of Thibet.	Grandam Alphabet used in several parts of India.

Secondly, they wanted to alienate the Assamese from Sanskrit as it was considered as the Hindu language. Thirdly, they differentiated between the literary and the spoken form of the language and considered the second one to be more convenient platform to reach the masses. And last but not the least they used the orthography to prove that the language is different from Bengali language. They defended their style and rejected the allegation of arbitrariness by declaring that their orthography is perfect as they were read by the natives 'with such ease and fluency, that it is to them like breathing their native air' (Long: 1855: 167).

But the spellings took a very long period to be standardized and several debates about the standard Assamese orthography were held in different levels in that century. Different publishing group adopted orthographic styles which were slightly or drastically different. Before 1873, that debate was limited to the missionaries and Assamese intellectuals. But after 1873, the colonial government tried to standardize the spellings of the language. It tried to regulate the language in the form of text-books as this was the foundation of

language learning for the young native readers. It was hoped that the language would take the required shape through the text-books.

3.6 **Translation project**

Translation has often been used as a major apparatus in European colonialism. Bernard Cohn demonstrates that the codification of Indian languages was utilized for colonial commanding (Cohn: 1997). Apart from that, translation has also been used for the construction of European model of civilization which the colonized should follow. In this case, the act of linguistic translation may be defined as a cultural translation. Colonial translation from the native language and vice versa generally served to reinforce the dominance of colonial aesthetic sensibility through a process of 'modern' language and their functioning to represent national identities. In the nineteenth century Assam, translation process was extensively used for colonial dominance. Colonial government as well as the American Baptist missionaries tried to create an enlightened, modern and Western alternative for the natives.

Translation works into Assamese contained a major part of the print texts in the early print history of the language. British Missionaries started the project on Assamese language with the translation of the *Bible* into Assamese. American missionaries also clearly emphasized the importance of translation works to shape the language as part of their evangelical project.

The translation project initiated by the colonial powers in early nineteenth century flourished into a large scale product at the end of that century. The project started with a religious touch which was evident from the vast corpus of Christian texts in Assamese. However, around the middle of that century the scene began to change. It was not dominated by foreign missionaries anymore. Moreover, different non-religious texts also got translated. Meanwhile the Christian translation project too continued with the ongoing translation of the *Bible* as well as other Christian texts like *Kaminikantar Upakhyan, Elokeshi Beshyar Bishay etc.* Towards the end of the century, the focus shifted to the European classics rather than religious texts. Kolkata based Assamese young writers'

targeted Western plays and poetry as the theme for their project. In 1888, Shakespearean drama *Comedy of Errors* was translated into Assamese as *Bhramaranga* and it was staged in Kolkata in that year itself (Saikia: 2001: .009)

The language community, and hence its language can be seen as a precipitate of socio-cultural process (Silverstein: 1998: 402). But printing and the attempt to structure the language in a 'modern' model usually takes away the capability of processing a new and living language. In this shift, the material and indexical meanings of utterance are stripped away, so that what remains is a purified semanticity. In the case of the Assamese language the same trend can be visible where conscious and structured process of language streamlining was perfectly visible throughout the second half of the nineteenth century. The Baptist Missionary School along with the Hemchandra Barua School and the Gunabhiram Barua School[18] was emphasizing different styles for the written version of the Assamese language. They had their followers too. Meanwhile the colonial government also tried to streamline the language at

least in the textbooks. In the last decade of that century the literary language was almost standardized and stable. The impact of printing was the major catalyst in this standardization process.

But at the same time, the Assamese orality also resisted the onslaught of print technology to some extent. Like the situation of Bengal, as suggested by Anindita Ghosh, oral traditions like community reading or popular performance coexisted with the fixity of printed literature in the nineteenth century Assam (2006: 153).

3.7 Pre-print Manuscript to print

The new paradigm of print culture made some spectacular changes in the erstwhile written tradition of the state. Apart from giving fixity to the text, the print sometimes made some changes to them too.

In Assam, printing was used for two opposite mediums – oral literature and written literature. Along with print, oral performance also continued. Interestingly, some oral performers used printed text for their performance. Sometimes they used it ditto, and sometimes

they improvised or adapted the text suitable for the context. *Bohagi*, a collection of *Bihu* songs by Nakul Bhuyan in 1923 was used for oral performance as well as written texts.

End Notes:

1. Selections from the minutes and other official writings of Mountstuart Elphinstone, R.Bentley and Sons, 1884, p.334.
2. The Baptist Missionary Magazine, July, 1846: 251.
3. The Baptist Missionary Magazine, July, 1862: 269.
4. Anadarma Dhekial Phukan's booklet cannot be categorized as a linguistic tool as it primarily emphasized on the difference between Assamese and Bengali language only.
5. Hemchandra Barua published *Asomiya Bhasar Byakaran* in 1859, but his more famous *Asomiya Bhasar Abhidhan* was published in 1900 after his death.
6. *Dayakarar Jiban Charit*, written by Dibakar Sarma was published in1872. Anandaramar Jiban Charitra was the second published biography and it was the life history of a renowned Assamese literary figure.
7. *Orunodoi* editorial January, 1858, p.1-2.
8. *Orunodoi* editorial: January, 1860, p.1-2.
9. Michael Madhusudan Dutta, the great Bengali poet converted to Christianity in the early nineteenth century.
10. S O B Ridsdale, secretary to the chief commissioner of Assam informed the Government of India of its decision that 'officers under Assam commission must pass Assamese vernacular examination...but it is useless for those who were in Cachar, Goalpara or Garo Hills'. Letter

from S O B Ridsdale, Secretary to the chief commissioner of Assam, to the Secretary, Government of India, Home, 21 July, 1876, in Home Proceedings, File, 91, no. 13, August,1876, BL.

11. Letter from H. Luttman-Johnson, Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, to Inspector of Schools, Assam, 14 April, 1874 in Home Proceedings, File, 91, no. 13, August,1876, BL.
12. Atmaram Sharma, hailed from Kaliabor, was said to be associated with the printing process of the New Testament of the Bible from Serampore.
13. Robinson was appointed as the Head Master of Gowhatti Seminary in 1835.
14. E.g. *kala`* (black), *kalatar* (blacker), *kalatam* (blackest) where particles are same as the Sanskrit particles of comparison. *Ibid*, p. 25
15. Hemchandra wrote several pieces in the journal with the pen-name *Sonar Chand* .
16. Letter from H. Luttman-Johnson, Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, to Inspector of Schools, Assam, 24 February, 1874 in Home Proceedings, File, 91, no. 13, August,1876, BL.
17. Letter from H. Luttman-Johnson, Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam, to Inspector of Schools, Assam, 14 April, 1874 in Home Proceedings, File, 91, no. 13, August,1876, BL.
18. Padmanath Gohainborooah referred to the Hemchandra Barua School and the Gunabhiram Barua School in his autobiography. It was also mentioned in an article by Benudhar Rajkhowa published in the eleventh issue of the second volume of *Bijulee (Bijulee*: March-April:1893: 229).

Chapter IV

Printing Folklore: Negotiating with Traditional Forms of Communication

4.1 Introduction

Colonialism changed the outlook of the colonies in almost all the spheres of life. It affected folk-life as it tried to change people's attitude towards their traditions. The affects generally were of two types – first was of a rejection of their own way of life and the second was of acceptance and pride in the heritage. There were also some intellectuals who believed in the process of reform and retain attitude like Raja Rammohan Ray, one of the foremost social reformer of early colonial India (Blackburn: 2003:144). Such attitudes finally lead to a hybrid society which contains values from both of the colonizer and the colonized.

Folklore, an integral part of the pre-colonial society, has an interesting story to tell. It was a practice for the whole society including the intellectuals and masses. But the folk-literature was seldom acknowledged as a pure form of literature. It was generally considered

as too ordinary or a pastime for the common people to accord the prestige of mainstream literature.

When a folk-text gets printed, it becomes fixed and cannot be changed at each performance which is a basic feature of folk-lore. The language also gets fixed at the time of printing. However, a live folk-tradition does not depend on print and the performers relied on the memory. On the other hand, after getting printed, the language of folk-texts brings a rare liveliness into the existing literature. The mainstream literature generally lacks this vibrancy and spontaneity as it is the medium of educated and they try to use a literary language, not the day- to- day language. Printing of folk-lore brings the liveliness of the common man to the modern literature.

One thing is clear that the folk-literature cannot be put in a distinct time-frame as they are orally transmitted from a generation to the next and hence the imprints of more than one time are visible in them. Moreover, several versions may be found with variations in language as well as in text, context and tenor which make it almost impossible to ascertain the exact time of the creation of the text. On the other hand, the language of folk- texts is not stagnant or static as folk-

texts have the liberty to change at the whim of the performer. It had the vibrancy of a live text despite the possible distance from the original time and source.

The nature and capacities of texts are closely tied to the *communicative technology* employed in their production, circulation, and reception (Bouman: 2008: 32). Before the advent of print and other media, the human voice was the only communicative technology. In pre-print culture, orality was the main feature which separated folk-literature from the so-called mainstream literature. Once printed, an oral text has to lose all these features as it gets fixed.

4.2 **Folklore and colonial intervention**

The colonial imagination used Indian tradition to strengthen their cultural domination over the people and their minds. It also wanted to control the reading practices of the natives by directing what should be printed in early part of the nineteenth century. In 1818, Mountstuart Elphinstones, who later became the Governor of Bombay submitted a

report that may be a pointer to the colonial attitude on the literate practice of the colony:

> ...Books are scarce, and the common ones probably ill-chosen; but there exist in the Hindu languages many tales and fables that would be generally read, and that would circulate sound morals. There must be religious books tending more directly to the same end. If many of these are printed and distributed gratuitously, the effect would without doubt, be great and beneficial. It would however be indispensible that they should be purely Hindu. We might silently omit all precepts of questionable morality, but the slightest infusion of religious controversy would secure the failure of the design (Naregal: 2001:151).

This chapter tries to highlight the colonial as well as native project of collecting and printing folklore in the nineteenth century Assam and the implication of this project in the Assamese language and literature. It also examines the role of folklore in the debate on tradition and modernity in the nineteenth century Assam. Moreover, it will try to ascertain the impact of folklore in the Assamese identity formation process as well as nationality building project of the late nineteenth century.

4.3 **Print and Folklore in colonial India**

The colonial regime wanted to decipher the Indian subcontinent and for that they had made different projects. Apart from the language policy and education policy, they tried to explore the cultural heritage of this vast area by collecting, translating and understanding popular beliefs. Like the language policy that was designed to shape and fit different Indian languages into a single framework, the cultural project was felt necessary to streamline the varied and vast culture of India. In many cases the language used in the folktales was also required for the shaping of a modern language.

British colonial officials started to collect Indian Folklore texts, mainly folktales from local story tellers from the middle of the nineteenth century. It is interesting to note that it happened exactly at the same time when similar projects had taken place in Western countries. But the nature of Indian and Western projects was not similar which is well explained by Heda Jason:

> This is the very period during which the collecting of popular antiquities and folklore blossomed in England and on the Continent, borne by the wave of

romantic and nationalistic trends and movements. While, however, the tide of 19th century nationalism brought with it the development of the main social and academic tools and institutions (associations, archives, museums, publishing enterprises, university chairs) for folklore research in Europe, India did not join in. (Jason: 1983: 105).

The Indian folklore study began on a different note as it was a colony and the colonial collectors' perspective was not the national spirit, but the decoding of the colonized. That is why there was a difference between the nature and tone of the collections by colonial and Indian collectors. According to Naithani the main difference was the question of outlook. She believes that the images of India were "usually unromantic" in the colonial collections (Naithani: 2006: 54). On the other hand, their Indian counterparts were aware of the historical and social changes their society was undergoing and hence, their motivation to narrate was "not a vague and romantic loss of tradition but the historical and cultural transition within a colonized society" (ibid: 48).

4.4 Print and Folklore in colonial Assam

The study of folklore of the Assamese language was started by the American Baptist missionaries. It did not get much attention from the colonial administrators in the nineteenth century. The first published folk-text by a colonial administrator was *Some Assamese Proverbs* by P.R.T Gurdon, who later on became an eminent authority on Assam, and his book was published in 1896. But not a single colonial collection of Assamese folktales, which was abundant in other major Indian languages, was published. Missionaries also did not take any definite interest in publication of folktales or other folk-texts collection in Assamese or its translation into English. Rather they were more interested in collecting and publishing medieval secular Assamese manuscripts like *buranjis* in *Orunodoi.* There seems to be one possible reason behind this apparent neglect of Assamese folk-tales. The folktales in other Indian languages was the base on which the modern vernacular was structured by the colonial linguists or the missionaries. As discussed in the second chapter most of Indian languages did not have a pre-colonial prose tradition which urgently necessitated the collection and study of folktales in Indian languages. For example,

Paramartta Kuruvin Katai, the first printed book in Tamil prose was a collection of folktale by a missionary (Blackburn: 2003: 45). In pre-colonial Bengali too, prose was not used as a medium for literary purposes (Ray et al: 2002: ix). Unlike this general absence of prose in the Indian languages, a pre-colonial prose was already present in the context of the Assamese language in the forms of *buranjis, charit puthis* and other literature. Hence, the Assamese folktales hardly became an important tool for the construction of a modern language in Assam.

The Assamese interest in folklore collection had begun towards the last decade of nineteenth century. This endeavour began to see some concrete results only in the first half of the next century. This task of folklore collection and print was undertaken by the same group of young Assamese intellectuals based in Kolkata who were influenced by the contemporary nationalistic spirit in creating a national literature. Many of them were inspired by the initiatives of German folktale collectors Grim brothers and others. The best illustration of such influence may be found in the preface of 1911 folktale collection *Burhiair Sadhu or Grandmother's Tales* by Laksminath Bezbaroa

where he acknowledged the works of Grim brothers as well as Herder's *Collection of Popular Songs* (Bezbaroa: 2010: 5).

4.5. **The transition**

The printing of folklore brings forward folk-text to the attention of the mainstream or written literature. Generally, the stylistics of folklore was not similar with other contemporary literature. Mainstream literary pieces usually try to shift the language from contemporary spoken forms as the presence of spoken form would make it ordinary. The themes of most of the medieval Assamese literature were from epics and mythology and hence the medium should have to be out of ordinary. As discussed in the first chapter, most of the medieval Assamese writers proclaimed to write in vernacular only for the sake of the so-called low-castes and women who were generally illiterate. Still, they used such a medium or language that forced the intrusion of a *pathak* or a professional reader. As most of the target readers were illiterate, a literate middle man was essential to read as well as explain the text to them.

In pre-colonial time, folklore was not considered as a proper literature. They were scattered and in the oral form far from the limelight. Apart from the annual ritual of *husari* and *mukali bihu* in front of the *Rangghar* palace, folk-performance was not meant for elite consumption. Nineteenth century colonialism gradually changed that perspective and towards the end of the century folklore came to the forefront as one of the identity marker of the Assamese nation. The language and style of the Assamese folklore was hailed by the neo-intellectuals as pure and rooted.

Printing of folklore in the nineteenth century was used as a tool for educating people in a familiar way. It was also used as a gateway to the native mind by the missionaries. The missionaries preferred to preach the local people in a localized manner and in that case oral literature and folk-customs and believes were useful. Accommodating local texts into their conversion process was an integral part of the mission (Mason: 1921: 34).

An analysis of the study and use of folklore in the nineteenth century Assam points to the interplay of different agenda by different forums. Colonial institutions like the missionary magazine printed and published local and Western folk-text to either propagate religion in an entertaining package or to increase their readability among common people. On the other hand, in the early colonial Assam, folklore was the point of division between the aristocrats and the common people. In the first half of the nineteenth century, some aspects of folk tradition were acknowledged as a tradition practiced only by the lower class or the *'itor's* which should be banned as they were vulgar. Haliram Dhekial Phukan (Tamuli: 2005: 80) detested the song and dance part of the Bihu festival as it encouraged free mixing. This attitude was prevailed among the Assamese intellectuals til the *Asamiya Bhasar Unnati Sadhini Sabha* or the Society for the Development of the Assamese language and their mouthpiece *Jonaki* considered Assamese folklore as an integral part of Assamese literary and cultural repertoire in 1889. After that Assamese folklore became a marker of national identity. This sudden change in the attitude towards folklore was a reflection of the changing attitude of the Assamese intellectuals toward their nativity.

When the oral tradition had come to be printed, there had been mediators between the very different repositories of the traditional memory based text and literature. In the nineteenth century Assam one motive for publication and printing of oral literature was to preserve traditional knowledge which must have seemed to be challenged and dying with the onslaught of alien culture. But there was also intelligent pleasure in the artistic compositions which were visible in the efforts of later nineteenth century writers and editors like Laksminath Bezbaroa and Chandrakumar Agarwala. Of course it was a much later phenomenon that happened in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The earlier collector or compiler of oral literature such as proverbs and idioms seemed to print them for different reasons other than only preservation. The Baptist missionaries urgently required a vocabulary base for the missionaries and their probable students. They needed it to master the language in which they were expected to translate Christian literature. Moreover, they must have language text books for their schools and oral literature in print form also became an integral feature in their curriculum.

The history of publication of Assamese oral traditions, of the narratives, songs, sayings, and genealogies handed down over

generations is, as some historians of literacy might expect, marked by length and quality of experience of literacy. The transition of the oral traditions to print would make a fascinating history. It would be important to an examination of Assamese response to writing and print. Not every folk-literature or folk- customs died with the printing. At least with regard to traditional knowledge, Assamese masses have retained many customs of an oral tradition.

In the 1840s and 1850s the missionaries produced books of sayings in Assamese with English translations. They also published Indian and Western folk-narratives in *Orunodoi,* the first Assamese journal. In that sense, the missionaries were the first to decide how the oral texts, the form of songs, sayings and genealogies, should be laid out in print. It is quite interesting to note that the way in which oral narratives are printed may alter how they are understood. For instance, in *Burhiair Sadhu*, the first major printed anthology of Assamese folktales, Lakshminath Bezbaroa who was also the first Assamese short story writer narrated the tales in exactly the same way he wrote some of his short stories. A close comparison between these two could reveal him as an intrusive editor by late twentieth century standards. Perhaps to please readers unfamiliar with oral style, he restructured

folk-tales by changing words, names, grammar, and the order of events. Editing for a reader shifts the emphasis from the ear to the eye, and the isolated reader requires explicitness unusual to the oral texts which were typically oblique and elliptical to regular performer-cum narrator as well as the audience. The public purpose of print pressed changes on that style. Print also brought translation process into the oral traditions as it is rare for the oral literature to be only in one language. The missionaries paved the way by translating non-Assamese folktales into Assamese.

4.6 Response to Folklore in print

It is true that the complexities of the shift to print can be envisaged from other printed material too. But folklore in printed form gives legitimacy to the folk-culture. In pre-print time, the response of the Assamese elite society to folklore was ambiguous to say the least. It did not consider folk-literature as a genre of pure or mainstream literature. But Madhava Kandali, Sankaradeva and other noted Assamese writers used different folk-materials and expressions in their adaptations of Sanskrit epics and *puranas*. Kandali liberally used folk

expressions and idioms in the fourteenth century Assamese translation of the Ramayana by Valmiki (Lekharu: 1993: 41-47). Same ambiguity may be noted in the reception of folk-cultures too. Ahom kings included *Bihu* in their cultural calendar and observed the festival at the *Ranghar* in the capital. In fact, it was also used as a war technique in the later phase of the Ahom monarchy when Ahom troops recaptured their palace from the Moamorias in the disguise of a *Bihu* performing group. Despite the royal recognition, aristocrat Assamese did not recognize the festival as a major one in their writings. There was not any reference of it in the mainstream medieval Assamese literature too. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, this attitude prevailed up to the late nineteenth century.

Publication also saw a shift from a local version to a consolidated Assamese content, and therefore fragmentation of the unified local tradition. They began what was to become a common practice of knitting together local versions of stories into a printed Assamese whole. As the alphabet obscured dialect, so print masked dialectical identity in the oral traditions. And this tradition was continued to the end of the next century.

The production of books had been limited by the Assamese people in the nineteenth century and invariably the work of Assamese scholars, those whose professions—in the church, school and other government jobs—required literate scholarship. This raises some interesting questions about the nature of Assamese literacy. By the end of the century, the *Jonaki* group made an exceptional contribution to the printing and discussions of oral literature. It was a combination of analytic mind and literary spirit as well as their desire to revive the oral arts that led them to collect hundreds of songs and narratives for publication. Of all the oral traditions the songs and the tales were most visible in writing and print. But it is still not clear about its reception from the common people who were the important informants as well as performer of these traditions.

There is no way of knowing whether, the circumstances being different, Assamese would have printed more or less of their traditional knowledge in the nineteenth century. If the colonial forces had not started the printing of traditional knowledge and oral narratives, Assamese elites might not get interested in those literary forms which were considered as rustic before the missionaries' enterprises. At that time, there was still adherence to the thinking and ways of an oral

tradition among the community. Few traditionally wise men wanted to part their knowledge to an outsider and sought to publish their knowledge. It was just like their counterparts who did not want to let print the manuscripts of *shastras and buranjis* they had with them as they were afraid of losing the sanctity in the print version.

The most conservative refused the new print technology but others valued it as a means of preservation, a voice to future generations, a way of establishing a literary heritage. The editorials and prefaces of such works may identify the scope and aspirations of publishing the folklore. It may be pointed that the somewhat limited publishing of old oral texts in the nineteenth century as early twentieth century Assam was a consequence of several factors such as a recent history of literacy, colonization, language loss and religious views about the traditional knowledge and the new found sense of pride in nationalism and oral literature.

The collection of *bihu* songs which was translated as Pastoral Poems and Ballads in the introduction in the early twentieth century may be analyzed as a case study about the standard practice of printing folklore in Assam. *Bohagi,* the first anthology of Bihusongs was

compiled by a well known Assamese historian and playwright Nakul Chandra Bhuyan and published by a reputed publishing house Chapala Sahitya Sadan of Shillong. The preface to the collection may point to some interesting features about the print and use of folklore in contemporary Assam. Bhuyan points out that the main objective of the collection was to put folklore in the national literature repertoire and use these songs in other literary writings (Bhuyan: 1923: .11). He also tried to erase the 'slangness' of some *Bihu* song by replacing these with some 'new' words (ibid: 7).

Different publications published oral literature in that century and all of them did not share same objectives for publishing folklore. The colonial publisher all around the colony published local oral literature for understanding local taste and customs as well as to contribute to the oriental studies which was very popular at that time.

It was almost mandatory for the American Baptist missionaries to print one or more folktales in every issue of the *Orunodoi*. In the eighth volume of the first year the Aesop's fable of a father, his son and the donkey was printed (Neog: 1983: 58- 59). Local folktales found place in

the missionary project later on. The missionaries never classified the tales according to their source language. Hence, *Orunodoi* printed Western and Indian folktales in the Assamese language.

The more interesting folklore project was taken by the end of that century by the *Jonaki* group. They either printed the folklore material itself or used it as the theme of their modern literary works. Their two-fold agenda were very significant for the analysis of social history of Assam in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century as the project was continued up to that point. In the first issue of the journal, Chandrakumar Agarwala penned *Bankunwari,* the first lyric in Assamese which was the amalgamation of Western style with content and flavour of Assamese folk-songs. In the same issue Bezbaroa wrote his first satire *Litikai*, based on the popular folktale of seven idiots.

Publication based on inter lingual communication pattern between Assamese and other local languages began in the early twentieth century. Kantiram Das wrote and published a Bodo-Assamese wordbook entitled *Kachari Bhasa* in 1907. Interestingly it was published from Borpeta where many Bodo people live nearby. In a

later date of 1917 a similar book on Mising-Assamese wordbook and Mising folklore material such as *bihu* songs. But the book is interesting for two socio-literary facts. In the introduction the author Dharmananda Duara Tamuli expressed that with the knowledge of *Mising* language, Assamese people trading with the *Mising* tribe wouldn't be deceived by the later (1917). The second curious thing is the declaration by the publisher or the propriter about the buying of the copyright of the book from the author which implies that the book might have a commercial value too.

4.7 The Nationalist Agenda

What might be less well-known, and is certainly less well-documented, is that the manipulation of underlying sources through editorial intrusions and self-censorship to serve specific agendas. This phenomenon also stretches back to the advent of print capitalism in Assam. The fine line between ethnography and fiction was sometimes blurred in that nationalist project. The concepts of distortion by subtraction or distortion by addition as two interrelated, yet distinct processes were considered necessary for creating a cultural heritage

that stands out in the Pan-Indian context. Calling to mind romantic visions of a sometimes quaint, sometimes glorious Assamese past, several writers used folk-traditions like the *Kabas kapor* in their writings. These objects thus served as symbols of nationalist memory and identity which could help the ongoing national identity formation process. Thus the nationalist themes of subjugation and resistance are keyed by some displays.

The folklore was considered native unlike other literary genres stemmed out of the impact of colonialism or foreign influence. As an expression of indigenous, pre-colonial culture, folktales were used as a medium for nationalism in the nineteenth century India (Blackburn: 2003: 148). In different parts of the country, foreigners as well as Indians collected and printed folktales in various regional languages. This was the second spurt of printed folktales after similar colonial enterprises of late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. Some basic differences emerged after analyzing and comparing colonial and native enterprises. The colonial printers used folktales either for understanding native psychology or as text for missionaries and new colonial recruits. The process was selective in the case of

missionaries. For example, *Orunodoi* never published an Assamese mythological tale as they were based on Hindu religion. But later native printers and publishers wanted to use folklore - mainly folktales to stress the nationalist point. However, the idea of linking folklore with nationalism was itself a Western idea. From late eighteenth century, some European nations started folklore revival movement that paved the way for nationalism (Blackburn: 2003: 148). Indian folklore collectors were also influenced by those folklore revivalist movements. Bezbaroa was the in the forefront in the mission of establishing the greatness and varieties of Assamese folklore repertoire. He was not a political nationalist – he never overtly joined the political movements and sometimes criticized their futility in his satirical writings. But, unlike *Asam Bandhu*, Bezbaroa never treated politics as untouchable. In *Kripabar Borbaruar Kakatar Topola,* Bezbaroa proved himself to be politically aware(Hazarika: 1988:1275). It was also evident from the choices he made as themes for some of his writings. In his historical plays like Jaymati Kunwari(Hazarika: 1988: 1137-1174) which was later made in to the first Assamese feature film by another nationalist Jyotiprasad Agarwala in 1935, Bezbaroa glorified the recent past and created a national symbol in Jaymati. On the other hand, he blamed

inner intrigues for the fall of the Ahom kingdom and loss of freedom (ibid:1175-1229). But he used popular folktales like *Litikai* and *Chikarpati Nikarpati* as themes for his comedies which treatments were greatly influenced by Shakespearean comedies like *Comedy of Errors.* It was an interesting admixture of local content with colonial style that paved the way for the beginning of the modern period of Assamese literature.

At the same time, he engaged himself either in collecting folklore materials --mainly folktales - for his folktale collections or using these materials as the theme of his modern writings. It is interesting to note that the narrative styles of most of his stories are a curious mixture of traditional folktale and modern short story. He included some traditional folktales in his short-story collections. It is also interesting that he rewrite the folktales of *Burhiair Sadhu* after collecting them from various informants whom he duly acknowledged in the preface (Hazarika: 1988: 855-909). Bezbaroa or for that matter most of the other contemporary collectors of local literary tradition at that time was not very concerned about the authenticity of the collected version. S.K.Bhuyan also edited the *buranjis* and added, subtracted or

combined two or more texts before publishing those in the early twentieth century. Maheswar Neog describes this style as *singimuri jora* or the carpenter's trick of joining of one end of one piece with the head of another piece (Neog: 1988:15). Bezbaroa also believed that a folktale must have a distinct structure and style. Otherwise it would become like 'curd diluted with water' (Baruani: 2003: 13).

It is clear that Bezbaroa's *Burhi Air Sadhu* was compiled from repertoire of several story tellers, yet it was the work of Bezbaroa as an individual that was used in the construction of a national identity. Though he acknowledges his eighteen informants in the preface of the book he asserts that he has rewritten the tales again by mixing different versions (Bezbaroa: 2010:7). In a sense, it was an individual voice that was taken into the public sphere. The multiple voices that were contained in the text were hidden from the public view. Yet the fact that they were contained in the text was one of the main reasons why it was seen as representing the people and capturing the national spirit.

In the earlier stages, modern Assamese literature relied heavily on local folklore material for their expressions as well as their themes. Most of the leading litterateur of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century such as Bezbaroa, Gohainborooah, Chandrakumar Aagarwala and Ananadachandra Agarwala and others used various folklore materials as the base for their modern literary pieces. In the first issue of *Jonaki,* Bezbaroa published his first farce *Litikai* based on a popular Assamese folktale. Padmanth Gohaiborooah published his farce *Teton Tamuli* which was also an adaptation of a popular folktale of the same name.

4.8 **Creating a homogenous culture**

The printing of folklore in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century Assam served several other purposes besides giving fixity to the text. They were used as an important vector in the nation making process.

The Assamese magazines published in the late nineteenth century like *Asam Bandhu, Mou and Jonaki* devoted enough space for

creating awareness about 'Assamese' culture and retaining the good traditions. In *Asam Bandhu*, Gunabhiram published a series of essay on the customs of the past and present Assam to give them a kind of fixity and a point of reference for later cultural historians. It also documented the rapid change in the society which was a natural fallout of colonialism.

In the Assamese nation building project, the standardization of language and culture took the centre stage which was evident from the agenda of *Asomiya Bhasar Unnati Sadhini Sabha*. Establishing one written Assamese language throughout Assam and compilation of a comprehensive cultural history of Assam were two of the major aims of the organization (Saikia: 2001: .014). Thus the rapid growth of national culture in Assam was closely connected to an emerging civil society centering on voluntary associations and the press. This connection helped invest the cultural platform with a wide range of political meanings in the next century.

The choice of a dress or the status of a folk-festival might carry some political meaning. Recent cultural history has given priority to

language, symbols, and every day practices. Scholars have repeatedly demonstrated how varied contexts and behaviours such as ceremonies, parades, or reading allowed men and women to create novel forms of cultural and political participation. The role and status of *Bihu* festival, its various rituals and the evolution of the festival from one of many to the national one of the entire Assamese community may be analyzed as an interesting case study of semiotic and culture politics in colonial times. Assamese press played an important role in the making of the *Bihu* festival. The modern Assamese literature of that period also used it as a symbol for liveliness, openness or innocence. Rajanikanta Bordoloi, the first major Assamese novelist used this festival so extensively in his novel *Rongili* that he has been criticized for giving it more importance than the main love story (Neog: 1986: 297).

Largely overlooked in Assamese historiography yet ripe for semiotic investigation, the Assamese cultural reforms in the nineteenth century provides an invaluable tool for mapping the contours of both an emerging civil society and the political practices of Assamese nationalism. At moments of political agitation and crisis, symbolic

practices can often take on a heightened significance. Nineteenth century Assamese society was too premature to observe all these reaction to the colonial power. Though Indian National Congress was born in 1885, it could not penetrate to the common Assamese people in that century. It is interesting to note the in the same year Indian National Congress was established, *Asam Bandhu*, the literary magazine declared in the first editorial itself that it would not have politics on its agenda (Saikia:1984:3). Meanwhile, Assamese intellectuals in the last two decades of that century tried to reshape Assamese society in such a way where tradition and modernity co-existed. Thus, even as they wavered between advocating modernity and praising nationalist reforms, most writers drew a distinction between masculine consumption of modern or western styles and feminine austerity of refusing it and attachment to native traditions. Yet this dichotomy, like all such polarities, was neither stable nor universal. In the early second half of the nineteenth century, many Assamese intellectuals including Anandaram and Gunabhiram advocated for education for girls. In Ram-Nabami, the first Assamese modern play, Gunabhiram portrayed Assamese young girls having education in 1857-58. But after thirty years, a few intellectuals propagated against

any such moves for Assamese girls as it would go against Indian as well as Assamese tradition. It was ironical that Gunabhiram himself published an article in two parts against 'foreign' education for women by Ratneswar Mahanta in *Asam Bandhu* in 1885 (Saikia: 1984:139-142,161-164). Even a foreign-returned Bolinarayan Bora vehemently opposed formal education for women as it would rob away the virtues of the Assamese women (Sarma: 1980: 1-6). Interestingly he did not mind other changes in the lifestyle that had come with colonialism (ibid: 1).

4.9 **Conclusion**

The most interesting part of the mission of modernizing the nation on the basis of folklore was that the mission was carried only by journals and books. Thus the Assamese language became a major catalyst in that mission. In that process the language also got shaped and reshaped to be fit to express these new concepts. A large repertoire of printed folklore text influenced contemporary Assamese writers who

were in search of an original yet rich and rooted linguistic style for their literary creations.

The publication of various folklore materials had an important effect in the process of Assamese nation building. With its appearance, the status of Assamese language and the Assamese literature was immediately elevated. By demonstrating the richness of the Assamese language, these works gave Assamese literature the much needed rich and vibrant heritage.

Chapter V

Hybridity of Selfhood: Colonialism and the Cultural Reform

5.1 Introduction

The concept of civilization depended crucially on what it excluded, more so than on the positive attributes that could be claimed on its behalf. As Robson maintains, John Stuart Mill declared in his essay *Civilization* that "whatever be the characteristics of what we may call savage life, the contrary of these, or the qualities which society puts on as it throws off these, constitute civilization" (Robson:1977: 119). The challenge posed by Herder and other stalwarts of the Romantic reaction to the grand claims made for civilization, with its attendant industrialization, mechanization, and ignominious materialism, reveals the inner dissension that has marked the concept of culture from the outset. The concept of culture is replete with the sense of intellectual development. Herder's theory of universal history of culture attacked ethnocentrism, allowing that each culture is distinctive and each of them contributes in its own manner to the development and richness of the human species. Yet cultural relativism, even incommensurability that arises from the recognition

of the unique properties of language, environment, tradition and folklore of each cultural variant is vitiated by a historicism that traces the concept of culture from the earliest moments of humankind, only to discover that cultures develop incrementally by grafting and hybridity. The teleology of such a historicism entails an anthropometry, a measurement schema, for the ranking of more or less advanced cultures. For Herder, colonization and the enlargement of states is unnatural, as it is a mixture of different races and cultures and such unnatural families are destitute of "internal vivification and sympathy of parts" (Young: 1995: 39). Yet Herder's opinion about the "education of the species," and its progress rests on a model of cultural diffusionism, mixing and communication (ibid). The heterogeneity thus introduced demanded, by Herder and others who articulated the virtues of nationhood and the integrity of cultures, a ranking of cultures, and certainly played into the hands of the polygenists, the proponents of the thesis that humankind having stemmed from separate origins, each race was destined to follow its own 'genius' or course of history, and that nothing could be done to arrest the differences, whether in ability of reason or propensity to moral feeling and action, that developed between the races (Schmidt: 1956: 401-417).

In *Discourse on Colonialism*, Aime Cesaire notes that colonialism should never be considered as cultures "in contact". The effects of colonialism, Cesaire points out, are so nefarious as to be impossible to confuse with the positive effects of civilizations coming into contact through means other than colonialism. Cesaire argues that colonization has negatively affected not only the colonized but the colonizer as well. The colonized were 'othered', that is, they were considered inferior to the Europeans. The colonized individual was dehumanized and reduced to "an instrument of production" (Cesaire: 2000:177) to serve the purpose of the colonizer. As a result of colonialism the indigenous people also lost their culture. Cesaire argues that colonization is nothing more than an agent of proletarianization and mystification seeking to impose its ideas upon the proletariat who unthinkingly assimilates them.

The claiming of nationhood has always been a profoundly cultural enterprise. A plethora of recent scholarly works has examined the constitution of colonial discourse and nationhood by the production, manufacture and circulation of these and other markers of difference. That the lines of demarcation, of civilized and primitive, masculine and feminine, modern and traditional, scientific and superstitious, and so on, were always traversed by

ambivalences, doubts and anxieties was an insight that undoubtedly was proclaimed and enacted on by Gandhi and many others. The real sense of hybridity, particularly in versions of multiculturalism, cannot be merely secured by its limitation to cultural pluralism or diversity.

In the domain of colonial and postcolonial studies, the concept of hybridity has acquired another application, largely due to Homi K. Bhabha's analysis of the ways in which hybridity is both a product and a response to the colonial situation by the colonized. Bhabha has suggested that the value of the notion of the hybrid in colonial studies is that this mixed figure implicitly rejects the passivity implied by the previously accepted notion of colonial assimilation. His discussion privileges the fact that hybridity evokes subversion and appropriation of dominant discursive models of power. He recognizes that hybridity is the sign of the productivity of colonial power, its shifting forces and fixities. The power of cultural or colonial hybrids lies in their capacity to manipulate the "in- between space", "the Third Space of enunciations", or the interstice "that carries the burden of the meaning of culture" (Bhabha: 1994:38). In Bhabha's analysis, hybridity may be seen as a strategy for returning

the colonizer's gaze and for rejecting cultural paradigms of purity, singularity, and alterity:

> Hybridity is the revaluation of the assumption of colonial identity through the repetition of discriminatory identity effects. It displays the necessary deformation and displacement of all sites of discrimination and domination. It unsettles the mimetic or narcissistic demands of colonial power but re-implicates its identifications in strategies of subversion that turn the gaze of the discriminated back upon the eye of power (Bhava: 1994:112).

Identity or hybridity inhabit a complex structure, where causes generate effects and effects generate causes. A case study of British colonization process in India emphasizes that discourses of nation, culture, and race played an intricate role in extending colonialism, consolidating the gains of empire, and shaping relations with colonized subjects, besides being used by the capitalist classes and governing elements to order subaltern populations at home.

The concept of hybridity in literatures at the zone of contact between colonialism and native cultures has been the subject of major theoretical studies, some of which disagree with one another

about the efficacy of hybridity in explaining the indigenous cultures of the colonies. For example, noting the intense entanglement of cultural forms in ex-colonized regions, Edward Said highlights the incorporation of what would be considered colonial modes of articulation in the literature of post-colonial self–realization (Said: 1993).

Despite the shift of the meaning of hybridity to suggest mutual and voluntary borrowing, in practical analyses of texts, the term still carries undertones of racial arrogance. Nineteenth century Assamese modern literature and culture may be described as a metaphor for a process of mutual borrowing when cultures meet, intersect, blend, and transform each other to produce an in-between and third space between the merging poles. Hybridity cannot and should not be viewed in a limited sense, as a process in which the Assamese literature and culture adapted themselves to Western practices. One may assert with a fair degree of confidence that hybridization is an academic euphemism for the Westernization of non-Western societies.

Hybridity may also be defined in Bakhtinian terms as "a mixture of two social languages within the limits of a single

utterance, an encounter, within the arena of an utterance, between two different linguistic consciousnesses, separated from one another by an epoch, by social differentiation, or by some other factor" (Bakhtin 1981:358). For Bakhtin, hybridity involves a mixture of genres, modes of expression, languages, and texts from different temporal and spatial sources. Further, as opposed to the orthodox definition, which sees hybridity as conversion to the opposite side, especially when it is the colonized people being converted to Western modernity, hybridization may be viewed as the practice of enriching one's own culture, epoch, language, and genre through guarded acceptance and use of the characteristics of another genre, culture, era, and language. Further, hybridity involves, as hinted by Bakhtin and emphasized by Bhabha, ideological subversion of hegemonic practices in the way it collapses the boundary between traditional elements and mixes art with politics, theory, and creative writing.

Civil society, which may be defined as a zone of communication and association rooted in institutions independent of the state, offers a useful perspective from which to view the cultural reforms. This chapter explores how and why institutions of civil society came to champion Assamese culture in the second half of

the nineteenth century. These developments did not occur without conflict, and the third section thus examines the heated debates about the ways in which intellectuals attempted to define and make known the wider meaning of national symbols and culture with the help of a 'modern' language.

5.2 **Hybridity in Assamese language**

Hybridity in language and literature as well as the mindsets played a major role in the setting up the newfound pride in nationality in the late nineteenth century Assam. As language was supposed to contain traditional values, the Assamese language was put in the forefront as an identity marker for the Assamese society and culture. In the fast changing social and cultural norms under colonization in the nineteenth century, the Assamese language had to change to accommodate new norms. Assamese language was one of the major catalysts of the nation making progress and it was used for different purposes by newly established organizations. The language was also got shaped and reshaped in this process and vice versa.

The shaping of the Assamese language as a modern vernacular was the most important and spectacular feature of the local response to the coloniality in the nineteenth century Assam. The displacement of Assamese language from official purpose actually preponed the modernization of the language. With the initial support from the American Baptist Missionaries, most of the newly emerged Assamese intelligentsia took upon the cause of preparing the Assamese language as a modern vernacular. They got initiated to the western education, literature and cultural practices with Bengali as the medium. But that became counter- productive for the colonial administration as it ignited the passion in Assamese youths to prove that the Assamese language was at par with the Bengali language as a modern vernacular.

The development of the Assamese language as a career of modern thought in the second half of the nineteenth century was not a mere coincidence with the advent of modern Assamese literature. The Assamese modern writers consciously chose the language that could carry the new found projects of nationalism in literature and culture. The language of *Orunodoi* and *Asam Bilasini* was thus discarde as obsolete as those were not suitable for those projects. Both Laksminath and Padmanath elaborated the influence of news

papers and journals of contemporary Assam in shaping their literary career. According to Bezbaroa, the syntax or the sentence structure as well as the topics of the *Asam Bilasini* were not interesting enough for the youths. On the other hand the weekly newspaper edited by Hemchandra Barua was highly appreciated for its juicy yet contemporary language style (Hazarika: 1988:39). This newspaper along with the *Assam Bandhu*, edited by Gunabhiram Barua was the major catalyst in the process of making a modern Assamese literature. Bezbaroa credited both of them to prove that the Assamese language could be used for modern prose and poetry. (Hazarika: 1988: 39).

The language based nationalism was the main identity marker among different regions. The size of the total area where the language was used was a marker of the status and the superiority of the language. The nineteenth century Indian intelligentsia tried to capture as much area as they could as their linguistic area. It created a kind of commotion among the neighbouring language forms. Bengali was the first East Indian language helped and nurtured by the colonial force. Hence it became the most organized and developed language of the region in the mid-nineteenth century. Moreover, the young educated Bengalis needed more spaces for

their employment. The spread and recognition of Bengali as the official language of Assam served their purpose accordingly. However, this phenomenon greatly influenced the project for modernization of the local language as the local people conceived that the Bengali language was hampering the local prospects. That paved the way for creating mistrust towards the Bengali language as well as its speech community. It created a typical situation of ambiguity when one looks up to the Benagli language and literature as a model for their project yet did not agree to their expansionist moves.

The positing of 'difference', which in popular discourses is invariably confused with 'diversity', proceeds from a desire to maintain cultural community and integrity. On other occasions, it is the perception of difference that leads to aggressive attempts to mobilize and neutralize it into the same. The Assamese community, throughout the nineteenth century, tried to establish standard culture and language for the entire community. In this process, the diverseof cultural and language forms of the province were either ignored or suppressed. It is an interesting phenomenon that the Assamese intellectuals had engaged themselves in imposing the Upper Assam language form as the standard language and not paying sufficint

attention to the people of lower Assam. There were at least three occasions when the linguistic differences of the province had been suppressed. It was not till the middle of the twentieth century that the different forms of the Assamese language was acknowledged as part of the standard Assamese language (Kakati: 1941). Suppression as well as neglect of different language forms of the state paved the way for diversification of the state along linguistic line in the late twentieth century.

This continuity of language policy of the Bengalis by most of the Assamese intellectuals in the later part of the nineteenth century may be an eye-opener in the context of hybridity of selfhood. Actually, these intellectuals were by-products of Bengali sensitivity as their medium of school education was Bengali and most of them had their higher education in Calcutta. This acquired sensibility gave them a sense of a unique relationship with the Bengalis. They wanted to reiterate their Indian-Assamese nationalism as opposed to Indian-Bengali identity but they did not reject the Bengali method of chauvinistic language expansion either. The Assamese intellectuals who fought for restoration of Assamese and later decided the shape and structure of a standard language did not

show any hesitation in applying the same policy in choosing their dialect for the standard language.

What is more interesting to note here is that the Assamese littérateurs who criticized the Bengalis for their expansionist tirade against the Identity of Assamese language, themselves got involved in similar projects in the early twentieth century. Benudhar Rajkhowa, a colonial officer and an Assamese writer of repute had written a book on the dialect of Sylhet where he tried to establish that the Sylhetee dialect has a closer relationship with Assamese than Bengali (Rajkhowa:1913). It was not a mere coincidence that the time of the publication of the book was after the partitioning and un-partitioning of Bengal. Political, rather than linguistic compulsion seems to motivate the author to write this book. His main objective was to prove that the people and the dialect of Sylhet were Assamese:

> My objective in writing these notes on the Sylhetee dialect is to show that the ancient literature of Sylhet is Assamese; that the Sylhetee dialect has spurns from the Assamese language and the people of Sylhet are really Assamese (Rajkhowa: 1913:ii).

He had also focused on the similarity between the linguistic features and other social customs of Sylhet and Assam to establish the intimate relationship between these two regions. Moreover, he tried to assert that the affinity of Sylhet to Bengal was a recent phenomenon and that Bengali was not able to wipe away the traces of similarities with Assamese, especially in the vocabulary used by the village folk of Sylhet was concerned (ibid: 1). He produced two letters written by a Sylhetee *Fouzader* to the Borphukan at Guwahati to establish this affinity that existed in pre-colonial period.

The second area of contention between the Bengalis and Assamese was the erstwhile Goalpara district. Both the parties tried their best to woo and include that in their political and linguistic map. In an 1876 communication from the secretary to the Chief Commissioner, Assam to the Secretary of Government of India, Home department, the point about the 'uselessness of clearing the Assamese language appointed in the district of Goalpara along with Cachar and Garo hills was reiterated.[1]

Assam, Goalpara and Asami Bhasa, a booklet penned by Annada Charan Sen and published from Calcutta for free distribution in 1911 questioned the advisability of introducing Assamese in

Goalpara. He offered an extensive linguistic discussion based on *Jogini Tantra* as well as the writings of Edward Gait, Padmanath Gohainborooah, Gunabhiram Barua, G.A. Grierson, Dinesh Chandra Sen etc[2]. He argued that the spoken language of Goalpara from time immemorial was nothing but Bengali and the difference or the 'impurity' occurred only for the lack of education, inter-cast marriages, and the lack of confidence or attachment to the Bengali language.(Sen:1911:17). He also made a forecast that the introduction of Assamese as the medium of education in the district would mark the destruction of education as well as the social fabrics. It is also interesting to note that the author attempts to draw attention to the difference between the Aryan-Sanskrit and non-Aryan migration.

Advocate of Assam, An English Newspaper from Guwahati welcomed the Bengal partition as they hoped that it would help the Bengalis and Assamese to reconciliate their relations:

> We find certain good things naturally accompanying the partition of Bengal, and one of the bright points of that administrative measure is the probability of establishment of a brotherly relation between Bengal and Assam in the future. ... We hope as time rolls on, with the recent amalgamation of Eastern Bengal with Assam, the gulf would gradually be

> bridged up, that our Bengali brethren would see that the Assamese are none of the non-Aryan race, but are only weak brothers and as such deserve being treated with pity and a cordial feeling instead of envy and an idea of remoteness (Sen: 1911: 15).

However, the dichotomy of 'self' and 'other' remained relevant to the Assamese intellectuals even to the end of the century. The same arguments that were used in the Assamese versus Bengali language debate were used for the correctness or standard Assamese language even in the next century. Perturbed by the neglect shown by different Assamese journals to the Lower Assam variety of the language, a new magazine was launched by some intellectuals from Lower Assam. Published from Guwahati and later from Dibrugarh, *Assam Bandhav* had the noted Assamese linguist Kaliram Medhi, renowned intellectual brothers from Nalbari - Pratap Chandra Goswami and Sarat Chandra Goswami among its patrons and contributors. It tried to encourage writers from Lower Assam to use the vocabulary of Lower Assamese dialect as well as Sanskrit *tatsamas* as they thought that the standard Assamese had been polluted by the inclusion of numerous Non-Aryan words(Bandhav: vol III: 265) as they were abundantly used by renowned writers like Bezbaroa and Gohainborooah.

The emergence of new middle class intelligentsia was a striking feature in the social history of the late nineteenth century Assam (Mahanta: 1991). Unlike Bengal, where social reformation was in the centre of public debates, the Assamese language came to the forefront in such debates in contemporary Assam. The displacement and the lack of recognition of the local language created an intelligentsia who became multilingual as they had to learn Bengali and English. The restoration of the language in 1873 created a major dilemma for them about the medium of their creative writing. Many of them started their literary career by writing in Bengali itself. Bolinarayan bora, the architect of *Mau* wrote at least one Bengali poem in his school days (Sarma: 1980: 5). Padmanath Gohainborooah and Panindranath Gogoi jointly compiled an Assamese and Bengali poetry collection *Padma-Pani* which never got published (Gohainborooah: 1987: 9). Lakshminath also tried his hand at writing in Bengali but opted out after not being able to publish them. Thus there was a generation of Assamese writers, who like Anandaram Dhekial Phukan[3] could use two or more languages as their medium. But they decided to pursue the Assamese language for creating a *national literature*[4]. Moreover they focused on the status of the language as a major identity marker for the newly emerged nationality of the Assamese people. It

was interesting to notice the debate between two Assamese intellectuals who wrote in Assamese about the relationship between Assamese and Bengali. Bolinarayan Bora stressed that the Assamese people should follow the people from Sylhet who spoke in Sylhetee but wrote in Bengali (Sarma: 1980: 110).[5] It was just opposite of Benudhar Rajkhowa's project of establishing the Sylheti as a dialect of the Assamese language (Rajkhowa: 1913).

5.3 **Hybridity in Assamese literature**

Following the departure from a traditional characterization of typical Assamese aristocrat, the young generation of writes in the nineteenth century began to consider themselves as representative of the emerging highly ethnic identity within the Assamese culture. To create such a term in any iteration, however, suggests a possibility for pan-ethnic alliances under an umbrella term for political mobilization. Such a possibility prioritizing a pan-ethnic or ethnic identity rather than an Indian one suggests a resistance or even hostility towards Bengalis. Rather than forming a reactive ethnicity, this generation's affective ties to their specific ethnic communities far override an interest in a wider scope of alliances. Lakshminath Bezbaroa and Padmanath Gohainborooah, two of the

frontrunners in the making of a modern Assamese literature in the late nineteenth century, started their literary career not for their literary ambition, but to create an Assamese identity based on national literature. Gohainborooah, in his autobiography described his transition from an aspiring writer using Bengali as the medium to an Assamese writer who wrote the first Assamese novel in 1890. His training in Bengali as the medium of education influenced him to think and write in Bengali in his school days. (Gohainborooah: 1971 B: 27). However, his proximity to the *Jonaki* and later to the *Bijulee* changed his attitude towards the literariness of the Assamese language and hence he joined the Kolkata based Assamese students' literary pursuits. But at the same time he idolized contemporary Bengali litterateurs like Bankimchandra, Rabindranath and Vidyasàgar (ibid: 29-30). But it was the same Padmanath who describd himself as *'Bongal Khedoa Padmanth' or Bengali Padmanath*[6] in his later days (Gohainborooah: 1987: 96). Most of the Kolkata based modern Assamese writers of that period were like Padmanath. They were awed by contemporary Bengali writers and their writings. They looked up to the modern Bengali literature as the standard one. But at the same time they could not tolerate the disdain they had got from some from the Bengali community which

prompted them to try for the development of their own vernacular (Saikia: 2001: .009).

Mixing myths and magic, topography and words across hemispheres, modern Assamese literature, especially Assamese romantic poetry figured their intercultural relationship with their Western counterparts as reciprocal exchange. Western works hadchanged their outlook towards literature. But notwithstanding western influence, their colonial reception transformed the nature of the romanticity. It is a translocation, verbally enabling and enacting, between specific times and places, cross-cultural, trans-historical exchange. In 1889 the first Assamese lyric *Bonkunwori* by Chandra Kumar Agarwala was published in the first issue of *Jonaki* (Saikia: 2001:7). The poem itself was a marker of hybridity of contemporary Assamese literature. It contains English form with local substance and expression. Bezbaroa's *Litikai*, published in the same issue, was the first Assamese farce based on an Assamese folktale (ibid: 6-7).

The Assamese literature, as a whole was never an autonomous entity separate and apart from all other literatures. It had a connection with the pan Indian literary tradition from the

beginning. However, it had its own traditions, models and norms. The influence of European romanticism obscured authentic Assamese expression under the novelty of new influence, but it could not throw away the 'Assameseness' from it. Undoubtedly, the process through which the Western influence was spread out throughout the entire colony and beyond the epicenter was unambiguously imperialist in nature. The high-cultural discourse of Western literature with its imposition of a set of largely uncontested parameters upon a non-European cultural reality may be seen to be metonymic of the operation of imperial domination. However, Euro-romanticism crucially enabled a range of non-Western poets in the nineteenth century to explore their hybrid cultures and colonial experience. For these poets, the detour through Euro-romanticism was often, paradoxically, the surest route home. The intercultural poetic forms of romanticism, in particular, had been especially attractive to the new age Assamese poets in their quest to break through the monotony of repeating the existing tradition and to express their cross-cultural experience, despite vast differences in ethnicity, geography, politics, and history from the European counterparts. In an important essay, Ramanujan cites Eliot's famous description of European texts as forming "a simultaneous order", where every new text within a series confirms yet alters the whole

order ever so slightly, and not always so slightly. Indigenizing and pluralizing Eliot's theory of literary tradition, he argues that Indian texts reflect and refract, invert and subvert one another, that in India "a whole tradition may invert, negate, rework, and revalue another." (Dharwadkar: 1999: 8-9).

The dichotomy of being an Assamese Indian having a western sensibility was evident in the Assamese public sphere and literature of late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The new found literacy and acquaintance with European as well as other Indian literature and culture created the newly acquired tag of modern or new generation among the Assamese community. It may be noted here that the so-called Assamese renaissance or the emergence of Western like literature in Assamese was described as a grafting by Assamese literary historian Satyendra Nath Sarmah. (Sarmah: 1981)

5.5 **Hybridity in Assamese culture**

This rapid transformation of the concept of good and vulgar culture was part of a larger process of cultural change in Assam in the first half of the nineteenth century. Against the backdrop of emerging

colonialism, exposure and contact with alien culture, the erstwhile aristocrat intellectuals denied their roots as vulgar and then initiated themselves into western or/and Bengali culture. Haliram Dhekial Phukan described the *Bihu* dance as a vulgar art form participated by ordinary women and man of lust (Tamuli: 2005:79-80). As the newspapers and journals were the only space for public debates and discussions, the Assamese language played a major role in the revival of local cultural practices. Gunabhiram wrote extensively about the cultural practices of cotemporary Assam in comparison with the past (Saikia: 1984).

What makes Assam in the late nineteenth century distinctive is the degree to which consciously "national" costumes, music, dances, and language became de rigueur in all areas of social life. Such effervescence would have been remarkable anywhere; in Assam where the majority of the population did not speak Assamese[7] and where elite culture had long had a cosmopolitan cast, it caused both excitement and controversy.

Language was at the center of this transformation, and the designation of Assamese as the province's official language in 1873 only sharpened the patriots' desire to promote Assamese in all

spheres of life. It was desirable to speak Assamese instead of Bengali among the neo-literate aristocrat Assamese society as was common. In several write-ups by young Assamese writers in as early as 1860s the practice of using Bengali for speaking or writing letters were ridiculed (Saikia: 2002:132). Assamese patriotic reformers clearly hoped that the largely cosmopolitan aristocracy would embrace the Assamese language and lend its considerable social status to the patriotic cause. This aristocratic usage, it was believed, would send a powerful message to the status-conscious emerging middle classes, many of whom spoke Bengali as their first language.. In 1889, a socio-literary organization for the development of the Assamese language, *Asomiya Bhasar Unnatisadhini Sabha* was set up in Kolkata by the Assamese student community studying there. Those plans were not only about the development of the language alone. It was also about the image development of the language.

And this image of the language was the major bone of contention among various literary groups of the time. Every group accused other groups of tarnishing the image of Assamese by either excluding essential features or including features alien to the language. Started in *Orunodoi* itself, this trend continued to the early

decades of the next century. The debate about the use of *sanskritzed* spelling versus the *bhakha* spelling was a major issue in the early second half of the century. This debate also points to the beginning of the assimilation process with the mainland. Hemchandra Barua initiated this process by opting and arguing for using the Sanskritized grammatical rules as well as spellings.

The relationship of the language with Bengali has been evolving into a more curious one. Till this date, attachment as well as detachment is a major point of the relationship. Since the American Baptist missionaries had started to alienate the Assamese language from Bengali to establish the former as a separate language, most of the literary circles tried the same. However a survey of Assamese published materials of that era points to the presence of Bengali words or translation of Bengali idioms in Assamese texts. For example, as many as five instances of using Bengali words may be noticed in a single page of an Assamese-English word book compiled by an Assamese (Hazarika: 1899:4). Interestingly, that was the period when the battle about the independent status was going on full swing.

This wide array of national songs, dances, and costumes raises obvious questions about the definition of Assamese culture. As Benedict Anderson, Eric Hobsbawm, and other scholars have shown, the creation of national cultures involves a great deal of invention. Although the standardization of the Assamese language in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century had undoubtedly involved a fair amount of innovation, language reformers could draw upon centuries of Assamese-language literature repertoire. But the choice and selection of national heroes, festivals and costumes required much greater effort as there was no available natural choice. Those national treasures and symbols had to be evolved amid public discussions and debates in the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century. The national dress for modern Assamese women was actually an ensemble of traditional *riha, mekhela* and *chador* with modern or western blouse, chemisole and petticoat created on the line of modern Bengali style of that era. In as late as 1940s, both traditional and modern style of wearing *mekhela chador* was used. But the customization of *mekhela chador* as the national costume and identity for Assamese women was finalized in the nineteenth century itself. These symbols were legitimized with the help of newly evolved public domains such as Assamese journals

and news papers. Assamese litterateurs devoted a lot of time to create awareness about these national symbols as identity markers.

5.6. **Conclusion**

The interplay of colonialism with the local sensitivity paved the way for the new found hybridity in Assamese intelligentsia. The nineteenth century was the initial period of seeing and experiencing the new facets that came with the new regime. The process of assimilation between two alien cultures was still going on. But the cultural invasion from the west got an upper hand as the culture of the colonizer. As in other such situations, the people from Assam also got awed so much by the new and 'modern' culture that their local literature and culture and language to some extent was rejected by most of the new literati. Most of them followed a western lifestyle. In his autobiography Lakshminath Bezbaroa described the incident about how his fascination in Western or *chahabi* lifestyle made his eldest daughter to learn only Hindi and little bit of English (Hazarika: 1988: 83). But after initial period of astonishment, the emerging middle class intellectuals treaded on a middle path. By mixing their own tradition with the western one they were trying to create a new society as well sensibility. But this process was

penetrated to the grass root level yet at the end of the nineteenth century.

End Notes

1 Home Proceedings, August, 1876, No.13, File 91, From S.O.B. Ridsole, Secretary to Chief Secretary, Assam to Secretary, Government of India, Home Department, 21 July, 1876 (Assam State Archive).

2 This extensive discussion points to another aspect of new hybrid intellectuals who did not hesitate to club ancient religious scriptures with contemporary secular sources together. It is also an indicator of the entry of such texts into public domain.

[3] Anandaram wrote in English, Bengali and Assamese.

[4] Creating a repertoire of national literature in Assamese was the major thrust of contemporary Assamese litterateurs. It was believed to be an essential part for national development. Hemchandra Barua expressed his satisfaction about the state of Assamese national literature to Padmanath Gohainborooah in his wee days.

[5] Interestingly it stands opposite of Benudhar Rajkhowa's proposal of including Sylheti as a dialect of Assamese.

[6]Though *Bongal* generally means all foreigners in Assamese, in this context Padmanath means any Bengalis.

[7] The colonial Assam occupied a much larger area and the population spoke several language which were mostly non-Aryan.

Chapter VI
Conclusion

6.1 Introduction

The primary aim of this work was to understand the complex history of Assamese language in the background of colonialism. This study points out that the Assamese language that has emerged at the end of the nineteenth century was a result of complex social history of colonial Assam. Colonial institutions and knowledge as its by-product played an important role in the making of the modern Assamese vernacular. In the context of the Assamese language, missionaries were closely linked with other institutions of colonial modernization.

6.2 Choice of a language

A pre-colonial homogenous Assamese society did not really exist. It was roughly divided in several sub-parts which are sometimes overlapped with each other. Several large and small political territories of the province were at loggerheads at most of the time and it prevented from creating a homogenous Assamese

community. Colonial administration, by putting a large territory as one political unit paved the possibility of making a nation out of different tribes and communities. The choice of language played a major role in this nation making process. After almost a half decade of insecurity, the Assamese vernacular emerged as a major apparatus for the nationalists in the late nineteenth century.

The choice of language for the few Assamese pre-colonial aristocrat families conversant with the outer world was dominated by different non-linguistic features such as their location and their connection. It is interesting to note that many prominent writers of early colonial Assam were initially based at Hadirachaki, the border between Assam and Bengal for a substantial period. Hence they were well equipped to use the Bengali language as the medium of their writings. Haliram Dhekiyal Phukan, as the eldest son, learnt Sanskrit and Bengali because he was not allowed to learn foreign languages like English or Persian. His younger brother Jajnaram Khargharia Phukan was free from those restrictions and therefore he learnt Persian and English along with Bengali and Sanskrit. Thus it was quite natural that both of them wrote in Bengali. Besides the famous *Assam Buranji*, Haliram wrote extensively in *Samachar*

Chandrika and *Samachar Darpan,* two of the most prominent Bengali periodicals of that era (Tamuli:1987:.34). His brother Jajnaram and contemporary Joduram Dekabaruah also wrote in those periodicals (ibid:35).

In the case of Assam, the interplay of an almost anarchical situation with a colonial regime made the language scene more complex. Till the middle of the nineteenth century, identification with the Assamese language did not happen to Assamese aristocracy and intelligentsia. Either they were more concerned for making their place in Bengali public domain as Haliram Dhekiyal Phukan and Jagnaram Khargharia Phukan or it might be such that they were more determined to be a part of the power play, be it the colonial or pre-colonial regime as in the case of Maniram Dewan. They did not bother about the official installation of another language despite the presence of their own vernacular. Moreover, Joduram Dekabarua compiled a Bengali to Assamese dictionary and presented it to a colonial official. It may have implied that despite being aware of the presence of a local language, it was not considered as a suitable medium for literature. Joduram's project may be classified along the same line of Haliram who wrote *Asam Buranj* or the History of Assam for the benefit of the colonizers. Or it was in the same line of

Ruchinath Kamrupi who compiled a manuscript of a Sanskrit-*Asami-Kamrupi* vocabulary and presented it to a colonial officer in 1810. As it never got published, it may be observed that this manuscript was compiled for the benefit of the Company officers who were trying to be familiar with the region. Joduram too tried to help the colonial officers to officiate in the Bengali language with the knowledge of Assamese language. It may also be noticed that Joduram did not compile it for local or native consumption as he did not take any initiative to publish it. Significantly, he presented the manuscript to a colonial officer rather than the missionaries who had the means as well as interest in printing Assamese books. It should be noted here that til Anandaram started writing in Assamese, most of these aristocrats shunned Assamese language as the medium of writing. On the other hand, common people's feeling towards the Assamese language was indifferent in the initial colonial phase. They were much more occupied with more important problems of adjusting to a new regime than paying attention to the language problem.

6.3 **The colonial intervention**

One of the most striking facts was how little thought the colonial government as an institution had ever expressed for the role of

language in communication. They seemed to consider language as a neutral tool which had nothing to do with the specific society and culture it represented. In a multicultural society, the linguistic situation should be carefully handled to avoid the negative stereotyping and resentment. That consideration was not visible in the nineteenth century Assam. Bengali officials were packed off to Assam without preparing them to communicate to non-Bengali speakers. As the local Assamese speakers were concerned, nothing was done to prepare them to work with or under the non-speakers of the language. Predictably, the result was a fair amount of negativity between Assamese and Bengali communities.

Colonial institutions played a major role in the shaping of the Assamese language in the nineteenth century. The decision to declare Bengali as the official language of Assam and the setting up of a missionary station in Eastern Assam actually expedited the modernization and standardization of the Assamese language. After deciding that the Assamese language would be their medium of press, the missionaries tried their best to establish it as a separate and official language. It also created a public platform for the Assamese people in their mouthpiece *Orunodoi.* It is also true that their endeavour paved the way for the movement for establishing

Assamese as the official language. However, the missionary impact on the language was not a lasting one. Their language policy did not get much support from most of the Assamese litterateur and their language did not have any major impact in the standard Assamese by the end of the nineteenth century. Interestingly, *Orunodoi* was not acknowledged as a source of inspiration for the later writers. In his autobiography, Lakshminath Bezbaroa did not even mention it when he compared the language forms used by the newspapers and magazines of contemporary Assam (Hazarika: 1988: 39).

6.4 **Standardization of the vernacular**

Standardization or evolution of a language is generally considered to be a natural process. The evolution of the Assamese language in the course of one hundred years of colonialism cannot be said a natural one. Colonialism, with the help of different apparatus, shaped the language as a 'standard' one. After standardization, the language moved away from the different forms that had existed earlier..

Making a modern vernacular fit for printing took a longer time in the cases of other Indian languages. For example, Marathi and

Bengali took a much longer period to become a standard language based on the spoken forms. However, the Assamese language form that the missionaries used for their publications was projected as the standard form from the very beginning of the missionary publications. It was almost twenty years after that it was realized that the language could be shaped differently.

The amusing part of the social history of the Assamese language of the nineteenth century was that the standard of the vernacular was always evaluated with a comparison to another language, Sanskrit in the earlier era and then Bengali in the later part of the century. At the initial phase of the making of the language as the modern vernacular, the missionaries tried to distance the language from Sanskrit. Based on the dialect of Sivasagar, the Assamese used by the missionary school created a new orthography for the language. This approach was codified by the literature and language tools created by them. After some years, this approach was confronted by Sanskrit reliant intellectuals who felt that the orthography of Assamese should be Sanskrit-oriented because the latter was the source language. Led by Hemchandra Barua, this group advocated for an Assamese language which would be a mixture of *tatsama* and *tadbhava* words as well as local

words. Interestingly, Gunabhiram Barua, a product of missionary endeavour, later turned out to be a staunch supporter of Sanskrit-leaning Assamese. Later writers of that century followed either of them in their writings. In his autobiography, Gohainborooah narrated the interesting story of making a compromise by incorporating features from both the Gunabhiram school and the Hemchandra school (Gohainborooah: 1987: 31-32).

But after the restoration of Assamese, the purity or the dignity of Assamese was generally measured against the influence or use of Bengali language. Perhaps, the after effect of the declaration in both the provinces created the love-hate relationship between the two speech-communities. Assamese language suddenly became excessively self-conscious. A text got criticized not only on it theme or form, but on the use of Bengali words and phrases. The tendency was to establish the Assamese language as a distinct one free from any possible Bengali influence. Right from Gunabhiram Barua to Lakshminath Bezbaroa and Hemchandra Goswami, the Assamese litterateurs tried to position Assamese against Bengali. Bezbaroa and Gohainborooah, arch-rival litterateurs of that period, carried their criticism on each other especially on the possible influence of Bengali language in their writings.

The Assam administration also engaged in a serious debate about the features that the language should have or should have not. After restoration of Assamese as the medium of instruction in the schools of Assam, writing text-books in Assamese became a sheer necessity. At that point, apart from the mission press books, rarely any Assamese text-books was written. Bengali text-books were circulated in many schools for paucity of suitable Assamese books. To encourage production of text-books, government took several steps such as establishing Assam School Book Society and giving cash incentive to the best text-book of the year. Most of the contemporary major writers devoted their energy in writing textbooks for school as they felt that the availability of good textbooks could only ensure the progress of education in Assam. Padmanath described text books as the foundation of national literature (Gohainborooah: 1987: 51).

6.5 Language as an identity marker

During the process of claiming the position of official language, the Assamese language also became an identity marker for the emerging 'homogenous' Assamese society. With the help of a rich

heritage of pre-colonial literature and folklore coming into print form, the language was identified as the language of Assam and its people. The shaping of the language as a modern vernacular also helped creating a modern literature. The equation with the Bengali language and Bengali people consolidated the status of Assamese as the national language of the Assamese people. The fact that Bengali was used as the medium in many schools even after twenty years of declaring Assamese as the official language in 1873 aggravated the situation. As a reaction, in the 1890s Assamese was allowed as the only vernacular in a Kohima school where most of the students were non-Assamese speakers (Gohinborooah: 1987: 58-59). It might be so that it was the beginning of Assamese language chauvinism which was started as a counter reaction of Bengali expansionism that wanted to include the Assamese language in its fold. The Assamese community, throughout the nineteenth century, tried to establish standard culture and language for the entire community. In this process, the diverse elements of culture and language forms of the province were either ignored or neglected.

Emergence of new Assamese intelligentsia based in Kolkata was one of the most important features of the social history of the

language in the nineteenth century. As the shaping of the language was not natural one, it was quite evident that this group played the most crucial role of making the language as the career of modern thought.They engaged in serious debates about the language in different public spheres in both Assamese and Bengali. For example, the 1887 debate between Bolinarayan Bora and Mathuramohan Barua may be mentioned here(Sarma: 1980: 104-112). Many of these intellectuals were attached to the cause of the development of the Assamese language. For example, Hemchandra Goswami, even after joining government service, dedicated enough time for the upliftment of the Assamese language from publishing the *Hemkosh,* the dictionary compiled by Hemchandra Barua, after his death to compile a three volume anthology *Asamiya Sahityar Caneki.* He also played a pivotal role in establishing Assamese as the vernacular in the schools of Goalpara district. However, there was an ambiguity in their attitude towards the Assamese language. Though in public life they invariably used Assamese, it may be observed that most of them used English in their private correspondence. A parallel may be drawn with a similar situation in 1855 when Purnananda Deka Borua opposed the practice of using Bengali as a medium for correspondent among Assamese elites (Saikia: 2002: 132-33). It may be also mentioned that Anandaram

Dhekiyal Phukan used Bengali, Sanskrit, English and Hindi at just before his death in 1859 (Neog: 1983: .88).

6.6 Assamese in the age of nationalism and ethnonationalism

Assamese entered the twentieth century with a more or less standardized form. It came down to be identified as a symbol of 'Assameseness'. It became a vibrant language as more and more writers had started to write in Assamese and new magazines and newspapers were getting launched. The study of the language had started with the colonial project of Grierson (1903-28), which legitimized Assamese claim of being an important part of the Indo-Aryan linage, became the most important reference point for the latter linguists of the region. However the suppression of other dialects of Assamese led to the division of Assamese litterateurs along the line of their dialects .It was culminated in the publication of the *Assam Bandhav* in the second decade. It was patronized by the intellectuals from Lower Assam and it encouraged the use of vocabulary and expressions from the dialect of Kamrup. This feud took a bitter turn when Asam Sahitya Sabha refused to include words from Lower Assam dialects in the *Chandrakanta Abhidhan*. This attitude changed when Banikanta Kakati recognized different

dialects as an integral part of Assamese in his doctoral thesis Assamese*: Its Formation and Development* which got published in 1941. The study of the dialects of Assamese and other language forms of the state has started subsequently in the universities of the state. However, the language was still at the centre of different social as well as political equations of the state. The emergence of ethnocentric identity formation project of different communities of the region influenced the status and impact of the Assamese language in the late twentieth century.

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